

PHYLLIS PAUL

A Little Treachery



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A Little Treachery is enacted in a quaint-looking rural cottage in idyllic surroundings. Idyllic at least they seem to Clem and Catherine Hare, two elderly spinsters who have just obtained it 'for a song' through the offices of a friend of a friend, and who ask no more than an undisturbed existence. But troubles encroach upon their peace of mind as uncontrollably as the wild weeds throng in their untamable garden. The dark sequence of events by which the happiness – indeed the lives – of the sisters is destroyed is lightened by one sunny passage, the summer sojourn of Emmy, a young woman who brings to the cottage the energy and vivacity of youth and bohemia. Yet she brings also the contagion of the outer world, and against this Catherine's defences prove powerless.

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CATHERINE HARE came downstairs while it was still dark on an April morning, when there was a loud crying of birds from the woods. She went down the stairs very quietly, as she had done several times during the night, until she was in the little kitchen and before the door opening out of it into the other room in the basement, which they had called the garden room; the only comparatively quiet place in the house, so that she had put up a bed there. Now a fearful silence welled from that room. It was not sleep which so held its breath. No one slept. No one was dead.

But, after all, she could not face it, and turning at the foot of the basement stairs, which had led her straight down into the kitchen, she crept up again. She had not the courage, her utmost effort could not nerve her, to pursue to its end the impulse which had brought her to that point.

When she regained the top floor, she stood on a landing not more than three feet square. Two doors facing each other opened off this, and a vague lightening of the air, hardly to be called light yet, a mere thinning of opacity, showed the staircase to some extent, a precipitous little staircase between walls. The right-angled turn at its lower end was also visible,

for it led directly into the room, the middle room on the road level, and there was a window just inside. This, with undrawn curtains, also admitted the nascent light. In that room was the front door. The cottage stood on the main road, without garden or railing, so that one stepped directly on to the pavement, and in spite of the hour some heavy vehicle now and again shook its ancient, odd, misshapen little frame, lights swivelled across the ceilings and walls, and she was obliged to strain her ears against these mechanical sounds and wait tensely for them to subside. Her senses were all stretched. She was conscious of that faint, ancient smell, vague and at the same time a little repellent, the origin of which they had never traced; 'old Flytton's pipe,' they had jokingly called it in the early days. But of course it was due to dampness in one form or another – damp out of the hill in the side of which the lowest floor of the little house was embedded, which crept and crept through the soft old bricks and the big, crumbling blocks of barstone, climbed and delved and mouldered the timbers, preparing them for the worm, for the powdery draperies of the fungus, disastrously pervading the whole of its substance; damp which no fires could counteract.

But, above all, she was listening. The birds sang louder, many new voices came in with their own lays to swell the wild *jubilate*, so that she, who had delighted in this piping up of the sun, thinking it the loveliest sound on earth, and had thirsted for so many years of town life to hear it, was pierced by a fleeting presentiment that she would never again hear it without horror.

The cottage, the whole building of three floors, was little more than ten feet from front to back, the depth of each small room. Its structure was curious, highly individual; and therefore it was easily thought of as a whole, as an organism.

She felt it like that – acutely at this moment. Looking down into the dark, she felt the little, deep house beneath her, with its two cramped, breakneck staircases, as a fact of great weight, heavy significance. She thought of it as a thing which had played a dreadful part, a thing which could fitly be placed in one of those police museums where they show murderers' weapons.

Her awakening had been a sudden one. She had been sleeping heavily, in emotional exhaustion, and she had been roused in an odd manner; in fact, by a human voice. The house being so close upon the pavement, occasionally in the dead of the night the voices of belated passers-by would suddenly burst in on them through an open window with startling effect; sometimes as mere sound, the cause of the awakening, sometimes an intelligible word or two reaching them. Tonight, still half asleep, she had heard someone on the pavement say, in a low, bass, vigorous voice: 'Come on, no pity, brothers; get your whips!'

The voice had been real enough, no doubt; but the words, which her waking judgment saw to be impossible, and in fact at once recognized for words recently read and noted with fear and trembling because their frightful aptness was suddenly perceived, were of course only the syllables which her brain, involved in woeful dream, had matched to certain sounds. She had heard the walkers' feet on the pavement – they were already out of sight.

Now, while she stood on the landing, it was first very still, and then a few lorries thundered past. And the house trembled.

Surely there was some sound down there? A faint creaking, perhaps some stuff brushing against a wall, or the slight jar of a cupboard door giving against a loose latch, shaken ever so little by a tread? She listened, paralysed, forgetting

almost to breathe, in stifling anguish. Yet why 'by a tread'? Vibration was always at its destructive work among these old bricks and timbers. The little house was being shaken to death by this continuous vibration caused by the heavy traffic, which in the day-time was unceasing, with which its builders of more than three hundred years ago had never reckoned. When the lorries had passed, there was another long, monstrously heavy silence.

Then down below on the garden floor a clock could be heard striking with a deep, pleasant tone. The notes welled up, full and round, through the silence, like a voice raised naturally, the voice of someone whose presence was known to her, as if a familiar companion down there had called up the stairs to her some commonplace remark; some safe, comforting commonplace.

And a dreadful bewilderment came over her. For, 'There's the clock,' her thought ran, childish, meaning: 'The clock we have heard together from childhood. A voice which we two have known all our lives. *Then how can all this be?*' And she seized upon the childish argument; the terrible constriction slackened for an instant. There was something which was as it had always been. Then the rest, too - ? But the feeble fallacy gaped wide.

In the dark and the terrible silence down in that room, was one with whom she had lived all her life; who had always sustained, helped and protected her with an unfailing kindness, almost angelic; who had been overjoyed at the safeguarded future for her which this little house had promised; who had planned it all for her with tenderest care; one who had been passionately grateful to heaven for what had seemed a blessing.

She turned back into her room, turned with a blundering movement as if dizzy, flung back with a frantic hand the

half-drawn curtain, ready to cry out for help to any living creature. Looking over the flight of steps leading down to the back of the cottages, she could see far down the road. It was empty. As usual, as always, there was no help anywhere. But her thoughts were all disordered, they seemed deranged, she could not think to any purpose. When she turned her head to the left, she had a sidelong view which disclosed a landscape of garden plots, hillside and wood lying under the paling sky in the first faint light. White gleams showed a big expanse of water at a little distance; she saw one of the swans gliding slowly over the lake. The water, and the progress of this silent creature, which seemed to move in its sleep, amidst the thick shades of the encompassing bushes looked infinitely calm and like something very remote or happening in another world; a world suddenly lost for ever.

She did no more than glance at the scene. Her heart died within her. She dropped the curtain and threw herself face down on the bed. She was no longer a vessel of straining senses; physical alertness had dropped from her. She had fallen below despair, almost to insensibility. Only she pressed her hands over her ears to shut out the joyful songs of the birds.

Almost at once, though, her consciousness was as it were kicked to its feet, shaken free of these merciful fumes and forced to resume a fearful march. The despair in which she had originally closed her eyes an hour or so before, rather than her power to combat it, seemed to have been revived by sleep; and at the centre of her being a small, writhing creature, terrified past reasoning, once more sent up its senseless wail.

A broken, trembling and child-like creature it was which humbly pleaded: 'It is impossible, Lord, to do this to us *twice in a lifetime!*'

Y E S, she knew what was coming, knew exactly what was about to happen, for they had had all this done to them before.

But by whose hand?

'A peasant with a thick neck and face red as a carrot. "How can you expect her to take such a load?" "She is mine; I can do what I like, can't I? . . . I say she shall gallop!" "Such a gallop as she has not had for ten years." ' And he strikes the animal on the eyes, on the very eyeballs.

Memory helplessly reproduced broken phrases from that dream of cruelty, from which had come those words she had heard on waking.

When these died away, the picture of a little child appeared in a soft, mild light.

Days ago – or was it hours ago? – she had closed the front door on two callers and turned back into the room in a state so distracted that the very memory of it was blurred for her now; but she remembered thereafter rushing through the house, laying hands at random on such intimate possessions as she could come upon, her own and Clem's, the private papers, the letters, the little worthless treasures, in-

tending to destroy them or put them out of reach by any means – in the frame of mind, with the panic inconsequence of one who hears a terrible enemy approaching and must escape at all costs, and yet must take some vital measure before escaping.

But from this crazing memory also she stumbled forth, grasping the picture of the child, as one staggers out of a bombed ruin instinctively grasping a treasure.

She had come upon it that day while pitching the contents out of a drawer, haphazard, and she had stopped dead and knelt to take it on her lap, and had looked at it for a long while in astounded grief – this faded photograph of her sister as a child of two or three – and in looking she had grown quieter, because of incredulity.

Clem, her sister, aged two or three. A little blithe, laughing thing, with that dancing look in the eyes, full of light, which the camera catches in the clear blue iris. A darling, plainly; a child of the most happy temperament. It was a picture of artless charm. She was seated on the usual fur rug then in vogue. Clem's hair was straight, but it had been curled up into an absurd quiff or love-lock to one side of her forehead. The dress, with the little neck-band and wide yoke, was a size too large, roomy, both because of the fashion and to allow for growth, and the cuffs fell half over the clumsy little hands, which held a small tin cup. She was the very picture of glee, her eyes sparkled, her teeth were pearly, her feet curled together in that movement expressive of tickled pleasure in the young child. Catherine had knelt there for some timeless while, absorbing a faint warmth, and thinking, 'No, it's impossible! And tomorrow, of course – tomorrow – when they come to fetch her, we'll shut the door in their faces!'

If a pathetic story, half forgotten, had then come back to

her, a story of how, on any day of unusual gloom, that merry little child would begin to fret and raise a sad plaint till the light was put on, it had been out of her power at that moment to relate story and picture, to see how one shadowed the other.

But with purpose forgotten, she had gone on rummaging idly in the heap of papers she had tipped out on the floor (which lay there still, in the corner of the middle room), and so coming upon a photograph of herself at the same age had paused to look at that, too; the only passable one they had ever got of her, and they had succeeded that time only because it had been taken without her knowledge. Otherwise, she could have been trusted to weep and throw her arms over her head. 'What a child! My poor mother! There I sit, a born misery, as the phrase went in those days – there I sit with bleared eyes already suffused with tears and a face pinched with woe, and, because I am a little deformed in the spine, that bunchy, humpy look which adds to the dismalness of my appearance quite grotesquely. I dimly remember the occasion and believe I suspected the ruse and the hidden camera. It did not matter, I was always on the verge of tears anyway. They got me, but only just in time; a second picture – ah, here it is! – catches me shrinking back with a sort of snarl. This one was kept by way of a joke, and I, though terribly hurt by it secretly, never thought to destroy it. There it was. That was myself. Nothing to laugh at, really, for it's the picture of a frightful tyrant. (Remember that! An evil spirit.)

'No, if they had strangled me, I would never have blamed them, there would have been no accusing look from me when we met at Compt.

'Well, there's our story – it's all in the pictures. Look, Clem cries for light – I cover my eyes from it.'

They could not have been less alike. Catherine's was a miserable heritage of woe and weakness. She was born at a time when her mother was ill and wild with grief at the long, piteous sickness and death of a little son, her eldest child and passionately loved. And every inch of her betrayed that she was 'ill-born'.

But the darkness about this formidable goblin stirred uneasily, as if to body forth some further horror, and she turned to dwell as long as the vision would hold on the merry little one with the painted cup.

Clem had always seemed like one possessed of the perfect disposition, sanguine and sweet-tempered. She had always treated Catherine with the purest kindness. Not enough for her was the patient tolerance of the elder sister. Never questioning, even in childhood, that the burden of looking after Catherine should alight on her shoulders, she had never (and now who knew how much to the hurt of both of them?) lost sight of the weak and miserable little child.

Never lost sight of her!

But might it not be that the dreadful view of her small sister as a born misery had made too deep an impression on Clem's mind in childhood? Too deep, seeing that her nature was already all benevolence and compassion, all conscience and uprightness? And that the voice of her tender conscience, pleading the little misery's need of help and protection, had never been stilled all her life? And that she had regarded her all her life with an unacknowledged dismay, amounting at last to despair?

'Oh God, is that possible?' She seemed to have cried out.

She had actually been in a light sleep, perhaps, lying there in the April dawn, a sleep in which the present was obliterated, since Clem had appeared to her thus, young, always benign, still the protector, the refuge.

So now, if thought again edged on torment, it was because she was waking. She was like a miserable straggler from a bloody rout, fleeing with crazed visions of home through mud and darkness, on whom it suddenly breaks, through his fever-visions, that home is leagues away, seas away.

She woke suddenly. The hour-hand of the clock could not have moved perceptibly through all that intricate reverie, for the light had barely changed.

Some noise must have roused her; it was some noise which had returned her from gazing into a smiling face, half-comforted, to the little house in which the light of the spring dawn was now beginning to make things visible, as they were. A door closing?

She thought she heard a door close softly. She crept out and listened, staring down. Then she called faintly her sister's name, too faintly to be heard, and once only. Why, why did she do that? She waited still, crouched down, and made some attempt to cover her ears – but then thought, 'Look at it, don't be afraid to look at what you are doing. Useless to pretend.' She dragged on hands and knees into the next room, the room with the garden view, crawled to the window, keeping her forehead below the sill. Still she made the gesture to cover her head. But the inner voice said grimly, 'Look at it!' And so at last she stood up and launched a burning stare into the scene which gradually, gradually seemed to blanch before her eyes, touched by the white light from the east in its upper regions, while below all was dark.

'I cannot see!' she thought, terror crashing on her.

If she saw her sister going down the garden to the stream, to the calm, deep ponds, she had resolved to stand there, holding back the instinctive cry, urging on the broken will with all the force of her own, with all the spiritual force of

which she was capable. 'Quick, quick! Yes – escape. Save yourself. The only way!'

But the intellect demands what the selfish heart cannot accede to. The heart of flesh needs body as well as soul; hands, eyes, and every hair of the head.

A CHANGE of mood fell upon the tall, light-haired man when he was fifty yards or so from the house which he occupied in Kingsborough Terrace. He had been strolling along and idly scanning the façades over the way, and then his gaze had alighted and fixed critically on the front of his own house. Suddenly his sense of well-being was dispersed. He felt an inner chill. It was one of those mysterious, abrupt darkenings of spirit which as often as not have their origin in a rasping of the nerves by some detail not even consciously noted.

The mood was at once reflected in that near-handsome face in which the nose was too long, with a curious tilt at the tip, a trivial turn of feature which spoiled the profile, the large, limpid eyes were a little evasive, a little cunning, and the mouth, all too gently drawn, was small to weakness. He was hatless, wearing a linen house-coat, for he had just slipped out to the tobacconist's in Queen's Road. His sandy hair was already much faded, and this and a slight stoop, a vaguely harassed bearing, gave this man, who was still under forty, the look of one well on in middle age. He had been overworking, and had that air.

There seemed little to displease in the prospect. The road was a good specimen of the many residential terraces of Bayswater of the more moderate kind, lined on both sides by the porticoed houses of the district, large, but not gigantic, and having for the most part an aspect of fallen fortunes and of maintaining a good exterior against odds. But individuals stood out from the rest by their air of smartness and prosperity, and among these the one occupied by himself was conspicuous. It was bright with new paint, gay with sun-blinds and window-boxes, and had the homogeneous look of private occupation, rare in that part. Martin Hungerford had prospered remarkably of late years and was very well off. He had a growing reputation, but was of a type to find this something of a burden. The autumn sunshine, the breeze which agitated the blinds and flowers, and the vista ending in Kensington Gardens across the Bayswater Road in a frieze of trees, a line of traffic flashing from its enamelled and glass surfaces, and a towering strip of sky, brilliantly blue and piled with shining clouds, gave vivacity to the quiet side-road. Nothing displeasing was in view. His own house, spruce and prosperous, was on the sunny side of the way. The french doors of the first floor stood open on a balcony, on the balustrade of which flourishing window-boxes were ranged; and in the more business-like, large sashed bay of the ground floor, where his office was, he would very soon be sitting comfortably at the table, absorbed again in some fascinating problem of the drawing-board. That window was simply dressed with tapestry of sober richness, and the sill, both inside and out, was bare.

It was bare of flowers. But occupying the centre of the inner sill before the open sash was the item which had struck him with surprise and vexation – the discordant note in the scene. A small, slender young cat was seated there, perfectly still, in

the upright posture. It might have been enjoying the few last inches of sunshine; he fancied he could see the complacent glinting of its half-shut eyes. Yet it could not be seen very clearly at that distance because the sun, falling on the window sidelong and about to wheel off the front of the house, no longer entered the room behind it, so that the dark creature was set against a dark background.

He could not, of course, have stipulated that the new tenants in the basement must not keep a cat; a cat was almost a necessity in these old houses with their cellar rooms and system of underground offices, riddled with ancient mouse-runs. But he had understood that they kept no animals. And certainly he must protest against their allowing any pet to invade his quarters. He disliked cats. It did not amount to the hysterical phobia which some people nourish against these animals, but it was not far off that. The pride of an heraldic creature was in that pose, however, and no one possessed of a sense of beauty could do otherwise than admire. He crossed the road and paused for an instant at the foot of the steps to look up at it. It was a fine little beast. The rich, unusually dark markings of its coat had the muted lustre of velvet. No, it was not the common back-yard puss; its narrow head and slightly oblique eyes suggested its aristocratic origin, ancient and oriental. But it did not even look at him. It conducted itself in the aloof manner of its kind. More notably, the shooing sound he made from the steps failed even to draw its amber glare upon him.

He suddenly remembered that, on going out, he had locked the door of his office. To reach its place, therefore, the cat must have sprung from the curtain wall of the portico on to the sill, a leap of four or five feet across the gulf of the area.

Yet in the moment he took to glance down while ascending the steps, it was gone. Judging that it must, after all, have

reached its position from the inside and had returned that way, he hurriedly pulled out his key. But the front door was opened in his face. It was opened by one of the tenants of the top-floor flat who was on her way out. (For that aspect of private occupation had been carefully preserved; the top floor was let to chosen tenants, who were, in fact, close friends of the Hungerfords, the son of the family being one of the architect's pupils.) So the encounter was a pleasantly easy one. Mrs Winter was a stylishly dressed woman with a pretty face, the ailing character of which was largely disguised by a careful make-up. Sensitive to women's looks, and attracted by a delicate type, he admired her. And they spoke with the ease of members of one household on the best of terms.

She had stopped to say, 'I hear you're thinking of sending Simon to his aunt's for a little change? Any time, you know, I would take him, with pleasure. That would be less of a break for the child, perhaps? We'd make a great fuss of him, of course, and that might restore his little sense of self-importance. Don't you think so? He'd perhaps feel more like an only child again - I mean, the centre of interest and attention - and yet there'd be none of that wrench and possible bad effect of sending him right away -'

At these words, Hungerford's face changed slightly and was overcast by a look of melancholy. It was but momentary, and in fact had a trifling and rather absurd cause. He simply did not like the thought of parting with his little son for a few months, as was going to be necessary later, if not at present.

'How kind of you - but I've decided not to send him to his aunt's,' he said quickly. 'She's well-meaning, but it's not very suitable.' And then, having had time to consider her suggestion, he looked brighter again and spoke thoughtfully. 'But next year - next year, while I'm in Scotland in the summer -'

He was to go to Edinburgh the following spring to work

upon an important public building scheme, one of a group of prominent architects; a matter of great moment to him, of course, and of some anxiety.

'Olive and the baby will go to her people in Dorset – but Olive unfortunately feels she cannot take Simon as well, and so – Oh, do you know, if we might trespass on your kindness, that seems as if it might be a very good plan! He wouldn't feel sent away from home, and I should feel so much at ease about his welfare.'

'Why, then, it's settled.'

They parted after a few more friendly words.

Lighted only by the tinted glass in the door at his back and by a similar glass-panelled door at the end of a wide and lengthy passage, the hall seemed very cool and dark to one coming in from the sun.

He was about to go upstairs – the encounter with Mrs Winter having put the cat out of his thoughts for a moment – when he caught the sound of a crying baby, muted by floors and doors, but still all too audible, and an air of ironical annoyance replaced the enlivened one lingering from the meeting. He was tired – too tired to stand that, at all events. He turned back, went to his office door and thrust in the key, and as he did so he remembered the intruder and opened the door with caution, lest the cat should dart out between his feet.

No fleeing figure streaked past him and there was no movement in the large, white, workmanlike room. Leaving the door ajar, he went in, gazed vaguely from the window, fingered and lifted drawings and implements on the work-table, where he had left orderly papers carefully weighed down lest the breeze between window and door should catch them. Nothing was disturbed. But cats move with a marvellous delicacy. So he stood, rather at a loss, thinking it was just possible that so agile a creature could have leapt from his own sill to the next-

door bay, from which it might have come. He was recalled from this problem by the noise made by a child running across the first landing, as if about to come down the stairs.

Immensely occupied, with a mass of work pressing upon him, he had slipped out feeling the absolute need of a break after a day of nerve-taxing concentration; he had only to shut the door and Simon would know he must not interrupt. Nevertheless, suddenly feeling an intense desire to have the little boy with him, if only for five minutes, feeling, in the simplest way, a wish to fondle him and mark his beauty and listen to his voice, to refresh himself at that innocent source, that babbling stream, he made no move, standing half-turned from the table, smiling faintly, listening with extreme pleasure and hoping that the child would run down.

But he did not. The lively sounds went higher and then ceased with the noise of a shut door.

The smile faded. His face showed fagged and disconsolate. His eye, still cruising absently, mistrustfully, for signs of disturbance, alighted on a small piece of paper lying in the middle of the floor as if it had been carried there by the draught. He picked it up, read it, and stood thinking with a twinge of disquietude, 'Now, how did that come there?' and reflecting that it was as much as eighteen months since he had made that note. It had been caught up, probably, between other and more important documents and had slipped out when these were taken from the drawer. It was a mere scribble which he had made on receiving a phone message. The one word prominent upon it was the name of a country town on the borders of Hampshire, a pretty place where he had had business at the time, but otherwise of no significance. The usefulness of the memo was over, anyway; it had been preserved by accident. He tore it up with certain evidences of passion, of impatience and annoyance. As he did so, the door

was pushed open and his young wife put her head into the room. He dropped the scraps on the table.

A pale, narrow face whose character was both simple and subtle looked round the door at him. Its lips were thin and at the moment compressed, which gave it an air of quiet determination. Its expression was worried.

'I thought you'd come straight up to tea, Martin? Would you prefer a tray down here?' More than anything, he would have liked to have Simon down there to take tea with him, but obviously he could not say so to Olive. To desire his elder son's company, the company of the son of his first wife, while avoiding that of Olive's baby! Simon had lost his mother in infancy; and from feeling at first only the burden and awkwardness of having a motherless child on his hands, Hungerford had come to regard the little one with an affection which was apt to be overcharged because it suffered repression in being unshared by the mother, a fondness which was almost morbidly tender, as if it sought to combine both parents' love.

'Well, perhaps I will,' he said. 'I'm tired. . . . Why are you looking so worried, darling?' he added, somewhat carelessly, half laughing at her, as he began to give attention to the drawings on his board. 'Oh, yes, I heard him – the little villain. His lungs are sound.'

'Whose? Do you mean you thought you heard Baby crying?' she answered quickly in a tone between surprise and hurt. 'You're quite mistaken, it must have been some other child. He's been as good as gold all the afternoon, and is all smiles now.' Hungerford seemed about to say something and then thought better of it. His look became amused. Cats? Well, of course it was very like, with the aesthetic advantage on the cat's side. It would not do to joke thus with Olive, but he looked at her humorously, so that she could tell the trend of his thoughts. A fair, pretty girl – and perhaps that was all.

He felt inclined to tease her, with a touch of spite at his heart.

To what extent it was for Simon's sake that he had lately married again, he had never quite admitted to himself, yet was guiltily aware that it had loomed very large among his motives. The baby was for Olive's sake, Olive for Simon's. Only it did not seem to be working out like that. As for himself, he had little feeling but impatience for the baby as yet and was uneasy in the paternal role, with an irrational but persistent sense that he was too old for it. Perhaps the paternal instinct, never very strong in him, had been exhausted with Simon, or, rather, by this inordinate tenderness for Simon which made him weak. But the case was special. The child had inherited from his mother a certain strain – a strain which, hardly perceptible in her, had undoubtedly come to show itself a little more plainly in her son; but if friends guessed he viewed it with anxiety, they were far from guessing his real feeling: how moved he was to a deeper love by that pathetic trust from the dead, who seemed smilingly to have confided to him what he had once been pleased to regard as an imperfection.

But this young woman, he was now obliged to believe, was affected far otherwise. And in fairness he could not blame her. Yet he did blame her.

He had not invited her to come in, and his workroom was sacred. Nevertheless, she entered, though somewhat timidly, and stood beside him with her eyes cast down on the table. 'Ockentree?' she murmured, having caught sight of one of the scraps of paper. 'Why do I seem to know that name so well? Oh, isn't that where you went to inspect that cottage for Margaret Forrester?' He sharply gathered up the scraps and threw them into the waste-paper basket. But Olive went on, 'Well, not for Margaret herself, of course, but for friends of hers. Hare – yes, that was the name. Clemence and

Catherine Hare. As you had to go to – Farnham, was it? – you went there on the same day.'

'Yes, I squeezed it in somehow,' he answered in a tone in which surface humour was soured by an undercurrent of resentment. 'It was a great bore, her making such a point of it as she did. I simply couldn't refuse.'

'Was the place suitable? Were you able to settle it? I forget whether I asked you at the time,' she continued.

He did not answer for a moment, and his expression passed through one of its rapid changes; from meditative doubt to faint, dry amusement. 'It was all that could be expected, at the price. Why, yes, it did very well,' he said, and laughed slightly. 'It was suitable enough – for women of that sort and class.'

'Well, but were they pleased with it? I think they're women who have had a lot of trouble – as it happens, Margaret told me something about them only the other day.'

'Oh, pleased as dogs with four tails,' he said carelessly.

She glanced at him with a shade of misgiving, vaguely disturbed by something almost coarse in the tone of this.

He added, suddenly pettish, 'How extraordinary it is that people so rarely show any sense of the value of one's time. I thought it most inconsiderate of Margaret to ask such a thing of me. Good heavens, does she suppose I take on jobs of that class?'

'Well, never mind, it was a good deed. Perhaps you should have refused – made some excuse, though.'

'Of course – but I didn't like to. Margaret's an old friend. She's very persuasive, very coaxing. She knows how to get round a man when she wants something done.' And he laughed, consciously, with his livelier look.

'She's a great dear,' the young woman said. But her warmth of tone seemed a little artificial, as if she wished to make a

point of this with her husband. The reason at once appeared. She added eagerly, 'I've been thinking – if you really don't want Simon to go to his aunt's, I feel sure Margaret would love to take him. She adores children. Even a few months would help – he might grow out of it in a few months!'

'This is Simon's home,' he answered sharply.

Tears at once came into the young woman's eyes. 'He frightens me, with Baby. A child of five doesn't realize what harm he may do –'

'Come, we've had all this before.' Hungerford cut her short. 'Don't let him see you're frightened, and he'll leave off. Unconsciously, you convey the suggestion to him. At present, he knows he can frighten and impress you. A little jealous, that's all.'

'What has he to be jealous of?' she asked quickly. And Martin had to admit, nothing. She had been a real mother to the child, conscientious and kind.

She went away, his tea was sent down and he sat in comfort by the window, in quietness, with all the requirements of his occupation ready to hand: an ideal position for a working artist; secure from interruption, too, because none of the assistants was in the next room. But his thoughts were not pleasant, not contented. The prospect of parting with Simon – though the parting was not to be till the spring – darkened his whole outlook to an absurd degree. Or such seemed to be the cause of this creeping dissatisfaction, this mood of ill-temper and depression of spirit.

Something white down by his chair caught his eye. One of the scraps of paper had evidently floated short of the basket and drifted along the floor as the door opened and closed; and again the word 'Ockentree', scribbled in a large, hurried hand, as if done in some distraction, even in passion, at a moment of crisis, stared up at him. He could not recognize his own

writing. Indeed, it was a mere scrawl, and its unnatural running slant – for the paper had slewed under his hand as he held the receiver – now seemed to depict with startling vividness something like an unrestrained cry, a breathless cry.

Yet it was such an unimportant affair which the name recalled to him. It was such a trifle.

4

THERE had been a long prologue to that April morning, a long period while the ominous hints and muffled cries (caught on sleepless nights or in prophetic dream) were still enigmatic; a long, darkly worded prologue before the act opened.

It had started, nearly a year before, in the early summer, with the buying of the cottage.

They had been so very cautious, so terribly hesitant about taking the plunge, for there had been very little money to play with. The cottage was to be bought in Catherine's name. A small legacy unexpectedly left her accounted for some of the purchase-money, and Clem had made up the remainder from her savings. A large part of Clem's savings had thus been engulfed, for she had had small chance to save, and so after the house was bought she had very little behind her, while Catherine had even less. But to buy the house outright and make it all over to Catherine had been Clem's impassioned aim, so that, should anything happen to herself, Catherine would be left with a roof over her head (and, given that, one can usually live somehow, or so one hopes), untroubled by legal delays and complications. Clem's anxious certainty that

nothing in the business way could be made simple enough for her sister was all too well grounded.

The house bought, there remained only Clem's pension. It was a good pension, more than enough for both of them, their way of living was so simple. Yet the swallowing up of practically all their capital had at once begun to loom threateningly, for Clem, in the small hours. They were women who had been made apprehensive by long-standing misfortune. Besides, all this had come as the finish to a stony trek which had lasted many months, a very thorough experience of the frustrations and exhaustions of the house-hunter who can pay only a minimum price and has no car at her disposal. They were both past fifty and were already overtaxed physically. Clem was far from well; this slightly premature retirement from business was not of her choice. Then, conscious of inexperience as house-owners, they had distrusted their own judgement, which had made for anxiety.

So their relief at having the privilege of an opinion from a man like Hungerford, and their gratitude to the Forresters, who had spoken for them, had been boundless. A first-class man whose probity was beyond question – so they had been warmly assured. And, with that, they had cast all their cares upon him. They had trusted him, indeed, as they would never have trusted an unknown professional called in merely in a business way. With such a stranger, their critical faculties would never have been lulled so foolishly, they would have been guided by their own common sense; and that would certainly have saved them unassisted.

For they themselves had been dubious. They had supposed regretfully that so old a house, a cottage of genuine antiquity, going at such a price, must have intolerable drawbacks. Catherine's first doubt, 'But with that basement, that almost cellar floor, backing on the hill, it must surely be damp?' had

been capped by Clem's misgivings about the humble and shabby character of the neighbouring properties.

'In case we should ever want to sell again, you mean?'

But, no, it was a descent in the social scale of which Clem had seemed peculiarly conscious; and this had struck Catherine, for the descent was so trifling as to make the consideration ridiculous in her opinion; and, besides, no one could have been less snobbish than Clem was normally. Catherine had felt more than ever dubious.

Then they had been obliged to view the place while it was furnished, floors covered, walls screened, and were aware of the disadvantages of an inspection so imperfect. Still, was it usual to demand the tearing up of linoleum or the lugging out of heavy furniture? But they had imagined their surveyor would somehow have managed to discover the exact state of the floors and walls. Oh, they had been quite easy about that. Clem had finally swung up into high spirits, into complacency.

'Well, anyway, we can safely leave it to him – nothing will escape *him*! Now we've nothing whatever to worry about. His word shall settle it.'

They had resolved to act entirely by Hungerford's advice. They were prepared to give up all thought of the place at a word from him. And, fearing that the verdict must be unfavourable, they were resigned to disappointment.

Therefore Hungerford's rosy report had as much astonished as delighted them. It had been quite a little shock – a joyful shock. Rosy? It was more than that. He had led them to suppose they had secured a bargain.

They had never questioned his verdict. Perhaps it was too much what they desired to hear. The truth was that they were simply not self-confident enough to question it; they had said to each other that it would be fatuous to doubt the judgement of such a man; and the plain fact that, if they had trusted to

their own wits and had no advice from anyone, they would have turned the thing down, had added a cruel sting to the business of being gulled. Yes, it was true that without Hungerford they would never have bought this horrible and terrible little house.

A mere arbitrary matter of an agent's list had brought them to the place; a lovely spot, but not one they had ever considered. A place of which they knew nothing, where they had not a single acquaintance; much too far away from all Clem's friends; much too far away from London, of which Catherine had always thought so desirously. But they were so tired! Couldn't the search end here? It was not that they were sentimental about a country life, either. They were urban at heart. Neither of them wished to be isolated in rustic fastnesses, wasting half their days attending to primitive living arrangements and trundling by bus or bicycle miles into a town. But, after all, a country cottage of primitive type remains the cheapest order of house property.

This little house, then, on the outskirts of a picturesque country town, with what appeared to be an unspoiled countryside close about it, even when its position set flush with the pavement of a great main road had been taken into account, had seemed an incredible piece of good fortune.

Then, from the first moment, everything had gone so easily. Difficulties melted away – not a hitch anywhere.

But as soon as ever they were in the trap – yes, 'in the trap', that was the phrase which had burst shockingly into Catherine's mind at the first revelation. In the trap. No sooner was the purchase completed and it was too late to withdraw than everything had gone wrong. As in a nightmare, everything had begun to fall to pieces before their horrified eyes. One shocking discovery had followed upon another.

To begin with, on opening the door with their own key for

the first time and stepping for the first time into an empty house, of which Catherine was now the owner, they had been faced by a leprous wall from which all covering objects had been removed. They were silent, touching it and feeling the crumbling, clammy plaster under the sodden paper. Then they were too bright, jaunty. Clem flushed deeply in a way she had of late when frightened, a flush which stayed.

Next, there was Clem coming excitedly down the top stairs lugging a too-heavy pail; Clem, with her face still flushed morbidly with shock, attempting to smile over the dreadful thought which had come to her, lest Catherine should be frightened. 'How the traffic does shake the place! – do you notice it?' she said with a nervous little laugh, trying to disguise the seriousness of the statement. They were washing the house down when this happened, and had just had the filthy and strenuous job of taking up the old linoleum which had so kindly been bequeathed to them, and had discovered the usual reason for such generosity – the state of the boards, worm-eaten to danger-point; and dark and nervous views were excusable.

It was not that they had never considered the traffic!

The question, the only question, as they had seen it, was whether they could stand such perpetual turmoil only a few feet from their door. Of course they would never have chosen it. But, accustomed to the noise of town streets as they were, they had decided it could be put up with well enough, considering the many compensating charms of the place.

'And there's always the garden. In the summer, if we find the traffic tiresome, we can sit at the far end of the garden, down by the stream. Such a long garden – we shall be well away from the noise.' They promised themselves that they would have a lawn made. One big lawn should stretch to the stream under those old fruit trees – and they would get a man to tend it for them, too. They saw themselves in deck-chairs, in a lovely orchard place beside the swift little Berle, hearing nothing but the trees and the birds and the rippling water.

Ah, yes, the garden!

Its full length they had learned with astonishment and some dismay, for, viewing it from the house, one's eye was cheated by the gradual but continuous downward slope of

the ground. However, it was narrow, and no high standards were imposed upon them. Neighbouring gardens were no affairs of shaven lawn and trimmed hedge, they were true cottagers' gardens, a flower-plot here, a vegetable-patch there, and the rest in coarse grass under the fruit trees which was cut with a grass-hook in summer. Such a standard was within their powers, they reckoned.

And surely no site could have looked fairer or seemed to offer a fairer setting for a garden, with its gentle slope down to the stream which was bordered by the lovely, shimmering trees that favour watery ground, the willows and the black poplars and the cursive ash, with its glimpses of the two great mill-ponds gleaming through at a little distance, where there were many water-birds and the romantic figures of swans could be seen gliding; all set off by the incomparable background of wooded hillside? Then, although the landscape was full of trees, the garden was open, sunny; it was warm in the valley.

In short, they were enchanted, quite carried away, full of happy plans and prepared to spend upon the beautifying of this wonderful spot a great deal more than they could sensibly afford.

So thankful they were, so grateful for their good fortune!

Looking down upon that riotous welter of wild things, they saw the great discs of the angelica, of the monster cow-parsnip, of the virulent water-hemlock, royal spires of purple loosestrife, plumes of golden-rod, water-mint grown into bushes of light, cloudy heliotrope and the grey seeding heads of the rose-bay; all pushing up out of the massed nettles, the mare's-tails, the suckers and saplings, in the greenest, richest growth in that parched summer.

But they had lived too long in town. They had forgotten nature's signatures. They merely marvelled and delighted in

this gorgeous festival of bloom and colour and received it as an earnest of vitality – never remarking that all they could see were the weeds which grow so rankly on foul, water-logged soil. A mere jungle without paths, the garden was really impassable to those not properly equipped, and although one could walk the length of it on the neighbour's grass balk, it happened that, perhaps too much occupied with indoor affairs, perhaps because of a mood which was now all foreboding, they did not do this, and did not attempt an exploration till more than a week after they had settled there. To their eyes, as they had looked at it from afar, it had seemed just a piece of rough, overgrown ground which might be difficult to subdue, but never had it entered their heads that they might find it irreclaimable.

The moment of which they had dreamed, that great moment of making their first progress round their little kingdom, was put off and only faced at last in a slightly unnatural mood of gaiety.

Sinking spirits were not needed to render the picture monstrous.

On that ground, the umbellifers grew six feet high, their flower-heads were like saucers, their seeds like clappers; their grooved and bristled or purplish stems had the girth of saplings. The huge size and coarseness of all these water-gutted plants were quite daunting, quite shocking, at close view. Purple loosestrife was a delight to the eye, but it grew on an unfathomable bed of decay, of matted grass and rushes and layer upon layer of brown, liquescent stalk and stem. A number of ancient apple trees bore a harvest of red-cheeked apples, yet half the boughs were leafless, formed like coral and covered with a green mould; even those which seemed well-nigh dead had put forth a crop of strangely waxen, unnatural-looking, miniature fruit. Indeed, one felt it was a

marvel, and almost unnatural, horrible, that such trees should bear fruit at all, for the trunks were strangled with ivy, so wrapped and invested with that poisonous, sour parasite that their shapes were fantastic, swollen, bulging; the boles rotted in a morass.

The ground was all levels, but at no point was it possible to see honest earth. The thicket of weeds through which they scrambled had merely grown up over unknown rubbish – masses of sticks, bricks, dead trunks, accretions which formed hillocks, inexplicable subsidences which nearly brought one to one's knees. No matter where they stepped, water always squelched under their tread. Yet the weather was dry. A great outbreak of nettles occupied a higher area, of which they had hopes as they made their way towards it; but beneath was nothing but a huge rubbish heap, some ancient dump of bricks, stones, rotten wood, paint-pots, wire netting and lumps of masonry – it was as if a whole building had collapsed and been allowed to lie as it had fallen. And still in all the crevices water gleamed.

Frogs leapt out at every movement, and in such numbers as they had never before seen anywhere or imagined possible; toads crawled with their old man's gait, and everywhere they encountered this most ancient of faces, with the flat saurian orbits which make the large, dark eyes of the toad slightly baleful. They were not women of the kind to shudder at frogs and toads; they had been amused by the few of these harmless little tenants which they had seen up near the house. But now, in such horrid multiplication that one could hardly avoid treading on them – !

Ivy and a huge mat of reeds and mare's-tails of the grossest size claimed the lower end of the domain, and through this mat the scarlet clubs of the cuckoo-pint poked, as if to mark some spot more rankly poisonous than the rest. Strong over

it all was the smell of stagnant water and rotting vegetation.

There was no blinking the fact, they had been vilely swindled. Everything possible was wrong with their bargain, both house and ground.

So they came at last to a standstill. Words died away. They were overwhelmed by this final stroke. The whole place, dripping with its cold dews which never dried up, even in the heat of the day, seemed to be oozing a mortal sweat like the sweat of their own shock.

And the words 'a bad spot' came to mind.

So they were to believe that all these crying evils had escaped Hungerford's observation. For there had been not one word of warning.

But perhaps he had compounded with his conscience by using certain verbal devices, which they recalled and pondered later, too late for remedy, phrases like 'for the price' or 'not to everyone's taste, of course', lightly spoken: hints which he must have noticed were not taken, which did not come anywhere near to conveying the truth to them. Quite unconscious, was he, of having given ignorant people the impression that they were getting very good value for their money?

This betrayal, so unexpected, so pointless, had cast over them a sort of bewildered doubt of themselves, as if their sanity had been questioned. They became quite sick with shock, and both felt physically ill.

What had the man meant by it? they asked each other again and again in pure astonishment. It could never have been due to incompetence, in a man so experienced. What motive had he? Why had he done it? A few words of warning would have been enough to avert from them this miser-

able disaster – and what would they have cost him? Had he been bribed? they asked each other wildly. Or, still more wildly, had he been fascinated by the pretty young wife of the couple from whom they had bought the house? It was recalled by them both as something which they had thought at the time a little odd and out of place, unseemly in the midst of business – of their own business, so momentous! – that he had twice broken off to speak of this young person with smiling admiration.

What must have been the young Ransoms' astonishment and delight at getting rid of their little OLD-MAN-OF-THE-SEA at such a price and so easily?

A plot? But was it credible?

Indeed, such fancies were too absurd – Catherine, at least, thought so.

These reflections had already been made when Catherine stood facing her sister among the shoulder-high weeds, and was shocked, struck to the heart and enraged by Clem's crushed silence. This it was which caused her to cry out passionately that they would have their garden, their lawns and borders, come weal, come woe; that one thing at least should be made to come right in that dreadful place.

From that time she pressed on, like one possessed, with her plans for the garden. Recklessly, with a foolish, desperate stubbornness, she proceeded to throw away her own trifle of capital on an attempt to produce the garden of their hopes out of that malignant wilderness. In that nightmare interval of six or seven months of loaded quietness which remained to them, the ground was cleared over a certain area, land-drains were put in and the surface roughly prepared for levelling and sowing with grass seed in the spring. The order had been given and she drove forward with it, while averting her eyes, stifling her apprehension before the spectacle of

Clem's strange, weak, eager acquiescence in this grandiose, totally impracticable plan, which was of a type to spring from Catherine's brain only, as Catherine herself now uneasily recognized.

For they were so different.

Yet they had gone every step of the way together, and they shared a bad history.

Not many young people are called upon to bear intense, prolonged mental suffering. But they had been. Their father had died while they were children and all their affections had been fixed on their mother; but when they were still very young women, her mind had given way. A tragedy of fifteen years had followed, and if a literal torturing had been done before their eyes it would have been a moral scene compared with what those years forced them to witness: the spectacle of a feeling creature kept alive in terror, despair and hopeless degradation which everyone knew only death could end. They watched. Official persons, curious or indifferent, glanced in on the scene from time to time, preserving their precious 'sense of proportion' without much difficulty. Interesting! How much longer? Perhaps they betted on it. Oh, hearts of stone!

Looking back, Catherine marvelled as she saw that it was really only gradually that her whole soul had been lost in a tempest of rage and revolt.

But here she could speak only for herself. She had never known what Clem was thinking (a strange thing, but it was so), for their spirits had drawn far apart, even while they clung to each other; creatures too deeply wounded even to communicate with each other any longer, except at the surface, in a most oddly superficial way. And Clem's surface had remained cheerful; a fact which, even at the time, had on occasion made Catherine pause in vague perplexity.

Experience of trifling kinds, family record, had taught her that Clem was a type abnormally sensitive to pain and with little power to hide it. So in this case, when she might more reasonably have been in despair than in good spirits, considering her situation, could one suspect Clem of despairing interiorly and hiding it from other people? Only on one condition: that she had also succeeded in hiding it from herself. But thankful for this sunny air soothingly enfolding her, Catherine had never pondered much upon the enigma, never dreamed it was a grim one, though she felt its existence and had vaguely put it down to Clem's having taken refuge in the rosy and endangering dream of reparation in heaven which religion admits. As for herself, she had continued to stare the facts in the face with obsessed fixity.

These were the thoughts and conditions of her girlhood, for the trial had dragged out all through their youth. It had slimed and poisoned all the years of hope. It was swollen, too, by a mass of subsidiary trouble, by money difficulties, by legal interference in their affairs, compulsion and duress. Those years when stirring things should have happened to them, things which would have established them in adult life, were spent in a waiting-room. A waiting-room where they sat with a thumping heart, with a distracted mind, with appetites grown morbidly faint, with young, keen faculties languishing, waiting interminably and waiting without hope. Waiting not really for a loved one's death – no, hardly for that – but waiting for an end to it all, merely for an end! An end to all the sickening suffering. Waiting for the cries of torture to cease. But such cries never cease, go on ringing in your ears to your life's end.

Perhaps Clem's blood had even then passed into its state of diseased tension.

It was over at last, but all their youth was gone and they

were locked together in a partnership which neither of them would ever be able to dissolve, because neither of them could ever bear to break this living ligament of nerves and heart formed by a shared, isolating anguish.

At the end of it all, they were women whose chance to construct and direct their lives was long past; they were both, though not yet forty, old in feeling, worn with passion, with the passions of grief and indignation, and the faulty beat of the heart, set up in that time, had become permanent. Yet the secret hope pulsed for a little while. To begin to live! Neither of them admitted the swift loss of this delusion – or its entertainment, even. But it did not take them long to divine that their highest bliss was to be freedom from pain.

For in some mysterious manner the new life, just as the old, seemed always to be tainted with anxiety. There hung over their heads – they felt its pressing weight – a dark cloud which had no cause, but was simply there for good. A most sinister cloud it was, for it had no reality, they could see that plainly; it was not to be accounted for by reason. They had not inherited madness, but they had been infected by it, by long, close proximity.

Everything had depended on what counter-forces each could bring against the infection, upon how the future treated them – whether well or ill, mercifully or unmercifully. They were indeed vulnerable; as vulnerable a pair of creatures as a thoughtless man in a hurry could have fallen in with, for his sins.

THERE was nothing to do but to make the best of their bargain. At least their surroundings were lovely. Catherine began to draw in strength; her resistance stiffened. She looked for enjoyment where it was to be had.

She was never tired of gazing at the view from the back windows of the cottage – that view which had such a vivid, marked character, in all lights and weathers such a colourful, populated look. This peculiar animation no doubt derived from the host of little details which the broad valley contained. The trees, of many varieties, the large, wild trees, were not so numerous that one lost the sense of their individuality. Set in their midst and rush-embedded to the edge of its basins was the bright, rippling expanse of the two great mill-ponds, fed by the tributary stream with its flickering willow borders. Then the eye marked the tended plots of dark earth, the grassy spaces patched with colonies of wild flowers, the little isolated huts and sheds standing far off in the open, the numerous magpies with their jester's plumage, the hunting cats in the grass, the women in bright aprons, diminutive in the distance, hastening down long paths to the flying washing streaming among the many

ancient and spreading fruit trees, the sharp flares of the bonfires and their plumes of smoke, then the winding lanes on the hills, a chimney-stack or so in the heights of the woods, horses galloping in a stretch of meadow so steeply tilted that it appeared like a field in a primitive landscape, innocent of perspective, and the broad, restless sky so often filled with the great flights of rooks. Sometimes the fabulous figure of a flying swan passed leisurely over the course of the stream. And if trains ran through the valley, too, it was at a distance which makes a train look toy-like.

This was the scene, so fair to the distant eye, which had tempted them at the beginning, and shamed consciousness of the folly of having been influenced inordinately by a mere view perhaps touched her feeling for it now.

Or was there actually something of ugly suggestion about it?

One curious feature of the landscape by which they had been struck on first coming there was the grass balks which everywhere separated the plots in the valley, in the place of hedge or fence, as in a medieval landscape; and this was only one of the many small touches which combined to give the impression of a scene out of an older world, older and yet childish. For there was something childish about this artless packing in of small, fascinating detail. Herein might be the secret of a slightly oppressive effect on one pondering over it with mind already sensitized by trouble. For to the conception of the medieval is always joined the thought of torture, of black darkness of spirit, of force, of force wielded by evil and ruthless authority.

Catherine was disturbed to find that Clem no longer took pleasure in their view. Gradually she came to realize that here she had a source of strength her sister did not possess. Their predicament, the cottage and the swindle which had

been put upon them now appeared to herself all matters of high imaginative interest; she saw their dramatic effect, it was like the beginning of an exciting tale; and thus, the first shock over, she was able to take themselves and their plight less tragically. She had got to the point of shrugging over Hungerford's shabby conduct and viewing it with detachment.

But with Clem things were otherwise.

Catherine was at last forced to stand back and fearfully, secretly, with rising dismay, take stock of her sister.

A febrile, anxious-looking woman with a strained forehead, curious spasmodic frown and a terribly enthusiastic manner; the bright, persuasive, conciliatory manner of one who had had too much to bear and relationships too difficult to deal with, and had borne up under it all by embracing a foolishly optimistic religion which enjoined upon her to take the bright view, brighter and brighter, the darker reality became; with a cheerful, running tongue which at last had gained an almost hysterical volubility (and with this Catherine was apt to be cruelly impatient).

So the tall, fair, gracious girl, not quite pretty except in her early youth, whose manner had charm because her wits were bright, her nature was kind, good and sensible and she was unaffected, the benign darling, the equable one, the tower of strength, had come to this!

Clearly such a change could not have happened suddenly, and Catherine had of course seen there was change; seen it and not seen it as it was. For *she* was the nervous one, the melancholy one. *She* was the weak one. (And this was true.) This sense of her own weakness, growing fierce with fright through the years as the weakness increased through Clem's tender fostering, had terribly contaminated her love for Clem; her harsh, cruelly critical, childishly trustful, pas-

sionately grateful love. Love like that was not of a kind to overcome fear. Now she was angry, bewildered.

But she could still say to herself, 'Clem is unwell - *she* has had this severe shock - and then this unpleasantness with the neighbours is wearing her down'; for indeed that was the point where the change suddenly blazed wide.

These neighbours were all of a humble class. The row of tiny cottages next to their own, but smaller, built of the same glowing, centuries-old brick, were tenanted by country people of the old style, most of them old, poor and ignorant. Oh, but Clem didn't in the least mind that their neighbours were humble. She hastened to make friends with them, to be helpful and kind. She had always needed a climate of good opinion, approval and friendliness - she had always enjoyed it in the ranks of that vast business community to which she had belonged since girlhood, and from which she had suddenly been transplanted to this distant spot, to be isolated among strangers. That ready-made society, in which she had been like the member of a great family, sharing and protected, that ever-shifting crowd and its transient contacts, had come to suit her so well. Of the surface and undemanding, such contacts had really given her, in her increasingly debilitated state, all she needed. They had kept her alive like some artificial nourishment sustaining life in an organism grown too delicate to absorb natural food. Feverishly now, like one clutching desperately at a makeshift, she turned to her neighbours.

But if she did not mind that small social gap, perhaps the neighbours did.

At once, as soon as ever they had come in contact with these neighbours, they had received a disconcerting impression of being surrounded by a buzz of malicious

curiosity, had had an impression of old men wagging their heads and saying among themselves, 'They've bitten off more than they can chew, them London women'; an impression that there was a gleeful satisfaction at their plight. One might call in a friendly way over the plots, 'I wonder if you can tell me of a man who will do rough digging?' And back promptly would come the answer in a tone of sly relish, 'Oh, miss, you won't get a man to work *that* gray-ound.' A kind of pride in the difficult nature of their region seemed to animate these old people. A chuckling amusement spread abroad among them because old Flytton's cottage had fooled the London women and beaten them – they would soon find 'he' was not to be tackled so flightily, not 'he'! A lively hope was obviously felt that old Flytton's would be one too many for them, as it had been one too many for the young Ransoms. References to the young Ransoms were frequent. Remarks were dropped casually. 'Ah, but *they* got it for a song, you know!' There was always some dig at their folly, or an ugly, scaring tale about the peculiarities of their property. Bad news of the cottage, it always was.

And the garden! When it was realized that there was to be a *lawn*, a burst of sour humour seethed about them like irritant smoke. For a lawn was the crowning absurdity. It was a ludicrous affectation, sheer pretentiousness, in a place where nobody had ever aspired to anything but vegetable-plots. There were references to Wimbledon.

Yet why all this malice? Perhaps it was a malice not so far off good-nature, after all, merely a kind of rough teasing? And of course they had smiled at it at first, if a little sorely.

But now – Why, when one was shocked and ill, when one's nerves were all wrong?

Clem's odd frown became more marked. There were days when she kept her eyes lowered in the street, passed by

acquaintances, pretending not to see them, or shrank into the house as if to hide there. She who had always liked and trusted her fellow-beings, even to the point of artlessness, now seemed to have fallen into a dark dislike of them, a strange, shrinking misanthropy.

Her physical illness, which had not seemed very much, suddenly took a graver turn. 'Very well, you must rest,' said Catherine in exasperation, for this of course threw a great load upon her and she herself was very tired and she could not help feeling that an illness the worst drawback of which appeared to be nothing but a requirement for rest was somewhat enviable. So insidious was this fearful disease.

Then one evening, when the room had grown almost dark without their noticing it, Clem leaned forward from the big armchair in which she had been resting and began to speak fast in a curiously low, furtive voice, as if afraid of being overheard.

Everyone cheated them, she said, everyone was laughing at their plight.

'For mercy's sake, Clem, who d'you suppose gives us a thought?' Catherine said, amazed. But it was useless. In careless, good-humoured inquiries Clem saw something wrong. Wasn't it a singular thing that there was no one in all that neighbourhood with whom they had had dealings who had not victimized them in some way? She went over the list of them, checking Catherine's protest. Hungerford – the house-agent – the builder who had persuaded them to spend money on 'improvements' he must have known were useless – the nurseryman who was dealing so unavailingly with the garden – a dozen more. And the neighbours, so hostile, 'not only because we're socially above them – Oh, but we are!' For Catherine had laughed. But Clem went on to lay queer stress on this superiority, in a way totally foreign to her simple, un-

assuming nature – and yet Catherine did not see it as an attempt to buttress a morbidly, ominously sinking self-respect. Even the new doctor – *she* had a peculiar manner, surely? Clem felt the doctor was getting angry – well, then, impatient. 'But I thought you liked her so much?' 'Oh, yes, I've been fooled – fooled all round.'

The very children who spat on the windows and kicked the paint off the front door four times a day on their way to and from school – did Catherine think they were merely children, merely noisome brats? No, they were sinister. But indeed these attacks, like all children's crimes, without redress for the victims, had been a genuine persecution and had kept up an evil excitement in the shaken nerves of both of them. So Catherine, knowing only too well that this was not imaginary, at least, was silenced; while Clem added she believed they were put up to it. But she smiled weakly, staring at her sister, so that it was possible to say, 'Oh, Clem, don't be absurd.'

Clem said hurriedly, Catherine must understand – they were getting angry! Well, she meant she had seen with her own eyes someone shake a fist at her in the street.

'That old chap is crazy,' Catherine replied, again with fear somewhat lulled by a background of fact. 'You know it – he does that to everyone when he's in the mood. He has done it to me, too.' The effect was not quite what it should have been. Clem nodded. 'You, too.'

'We mustn't trust anyone but each other!' she said in agitation, in that same dry whisper; and then, with a sort of weak return to her own quietly affectionate, protective manner, 'My dear – my little sister – what we have been through together!'

Catherine sprang up, but Clem thrust her off with a sudden harshness, breathing uneasily, put away the consoling arm.

'You won't do that when I have told you it all,' she said in a stern, heavy voice which was quelling.

Again she whispered. What had gone wrong? She could not reproach her God and so she turned dumbly under His lash and sought the reason in herself. What had she done? What wicked thing had she done? She saw now and confessed that she had always treated Catherine with the most wicked selfishness.

This was the discovery she finally whispered to Catherine in the darkening room.

Struck almost dumb by what she knew, with such shamed certainty, to be a monstrous reversal of the facts, Catherine wept, so much appalled that she could only stammer, no one, no one, could have been kinder!

But it would not do.

Clem was silent. Yet after a little while she brightened again and, most strangely, seemed to have forgotten the whole incident.

So all went on as before, for many weeks.

THE summer broke up early that year and in the autumn there were abnormal rains. They moved about the cottage, bundled in wraps, and chills were apt to seize them as soon as they were away from the fireside; the creeping chills from the damp walls. They developed unwonted aches in the limbs. And they were often surprised, on going out of doors, to discover how mild the day was.

The rain fell steadily, often in alarming torrents. New pools formed in the thickets. Now that the long grass and the weeds were shrivelled and flattened, all the gardens were clearly seen to be veined with ditches, and sometimes in a half light, when the sky was white and cold, the whole bottom of the valley had the appearance of being laced with silver. The little Berle sped fleet and brimming. Everything ran with moisture, everything sweated in the mild air.

The dark, slow days dragged their drenched lengths; sometimes out of the black and shadowy mists of the mornings lovely bird-voices cried, as in spring. At length came a sharper, dryer chill, and the birds were silent. Sometimes there was a sound like a wheel creaking softly through the air; it was a swan flying.

'Look, Clem, a swan! Listen!' But Clem did not look round from her seat at the fire.

Catherine's hands clenched on the sill. She remained peering out of the window she had opened. At their backs, behind the little front door, only a few feet away, the traffic roared and thundered almost without cessation, and scraps of talk between passers-by were audible and loud as if they had been spoken for their own ears. Footsteps stopped and they heard, '- and a beautiful view.' 'Yes, they're talking of us,' said Clem with heavy meaning. 'Well - admiring the cottage, perhaps?' Catherine suggested in good faith, for at present the cottage turned a very quaint, pretty and newly furbished face to the road.

Clem laughed. 'Your home, Cathy. Your lovely little home.' But what piled and festering bitterness it must be which forced irony from that simple, serious nature!

Catherine fell upon her nascent panic, flung the window wide with a clatter and leaned far out, almost gasping with relief as she drew in the fresh air. The nightmare thoughts began to lose reality, as black, tenuous cloud thins out over the sky till it is all but invisible and the bright heaven shows through. Her eyes rested seemingly upon that wide, darkening, curiously romantic landscape.

Far out over the plots there was a spurt of flame.

'A bonfire!' she exclaimed, and clutched ravenously at the idea. She would go straight out and make a fire - a practical, bustling, strenuous employment. 'Come out with me,' she said to her sister. 'Come, Clem, it'll do you good.' But she was forced to go out alone.

She went down into the uncleared part where masses of stuff remained to burn and into a small space she dragged and carried armfuls of uprooted weeds and brushwood, and for some while lost herself in this invigorating occupation.

She hardly stopped to look about her, yet she somehow absorbed the lovely transformations of the darkness, noting how colours were far from being obscured with the fall of dusk, but seemed to grow newly intense for eyes adjusted to the low visibility. The hollow stems of the huge angelica plants now showed plainly their smothered purple, the brown leaves burned, there were notes of buttercup yellow, the blackness of the soaked bark had a velvet depth, the seeded heads of the rose-bay glimmered in pearly opalescence. She could see the rosy apples hanging on the half-bare boughs; they seemed as if enamelled, impossibly coloured. Then, peering through all this great autumnal wreckage, she had a glimpse of the house; and in this evening light, which seemed slightly rufescent, its ancient bricks of a mild, deep red seemed almost to glow. Seen from this point, it had the oddest aspect, looking like some such building as a mill, tall and narrow, with its three floors and its small irregularly placed windows.

'Well, it's certainly a character!'

But, finding a keen pleasure in herself, she felt guilty, as if her pleasure was depraved. For how tensely she was aware that Clem did not share it! Thus it seemed a kind of treachery. Yet 'After all, we might be happy here' was her impatient protest; impatient because Clem's immovable loathing of the place made a constant fret under all her thoughts, driving her heart into the stifling pace of an old illness when she considered it openly; as she did now.

However, she turned to her purpose, struck a match and stood holding it for a moment, shielding it at a few inches from the great heap of combustible stuff, on the groundwork of which, seeing how damp everything was, she had poured paraffin with a reckless hand. In that moment something made her hesitate. It was a mental picture. A pictorial parable

was forced upon her attention. That heap would never burn without the match, and would not though it had been saturated to the core with the most inflammable of substances. One would not, of course, be fool enough to mistake the accidental precipitator of a catastrophe for its root cause. Still, the most terrible press of inflammable matter stored up year by year in the mind would lie harmless to the end, indeed, its combustible quality might even be dissipated in the mild air of happiness, as the fearful tide of the blood, forced up by worry and shock, would certainly subside. But if instead of good fortune came the fatal match—in-describably trivial yet fatal—the petty stroke of treachery.

She set light to the great pile.

The fire went well. She poured on more paraffin and more. A fierce, tongued blaze responded, springing out of the heap with a treacherous reach and suddenness, feeding on the oil. But she threw on her damp, earth-caked fuel, and then for some while the smoke poured up, yellow and thick, into the greenish sky.

Meanwhile, warmly wrapped, she went to and fro in the sharp and already dusky air, and raked, slashed, chopped with dogged energy, stifling the question she had recently asked herself as to what was the use of such labours, whether it was really worth while to make such devastation among these strange and wonderful forms. Nothing would ever be found to grow there with such splendid vitality as the natives, the lusty wildlings in their chosen habitat. A shamed regret, a disgust at herself for spoiling a marvellous scene now mingled distinctly with her stubborn purpose. And the thought burst through—for herself, she would prefer it wild. Anarchy? Wildness? Yes, she preferred it! So if she had blindly desired order, it had been for Clem's sake, impelled by a secret divination of Clem's obsessive horror. Then she

must still quite frantically desire it with her thinking self. She laboured on.

All the sights and sounds of the evening worked soothingly upon her nerves, absorbed in a mild unconsciousness, as a healing process works in the body. So for some little while she achieved a mindless calm, her eyes turned to the earth.

But at length it grew too dark for such activities, and she paused and stood still.

'No,' she at once thought with renewed anguish, 'no reason why we shouldn't be happy! *There's still time!*'

At that instant, something within the bonfire caught, and with a loud, crackling sound a dozen great golden flames shot up from the pile. Instantly, deep night fell all around.

Now the land was all obscure about her and she seemed to stand on a fiery islet situated in a region of intense darkness, a little point of earth all enveloped in this golden light, which seemed wonderfully pure and steady for many minutes together. The edges of the near-by leaves, the twigs, all shone as if streaked with pure gold; long shafts darted into the thicket. She was now in a tense, roused mood.

She had not stopped to consider that a fire, with its dramatic and destructive nature, a fire at night, with its wild and thrilling effects as the surroundings darken, may give a half-sinister stimulation to the nerves and fancy – to that very class of feeling which she had instinctively meant to check when she had sought the open air.

But she was conscious of some element of disorder in her, a kind of pleasure in violence.

No sooner had the flare subsided a little than she recklessly flung on more oil – for no reason but to provide herself with a further thrill. The flames now leapt twelve feet high, rushing straight up into the windless air, each burning with such concentrated fury that it seemed merely to vibrate

quietly with its aspiring efforts. It was a foolhardy act. In that overgrown place, one breath of wind would have bent those devouring tongues and turned them upon living fuel. She was forced to retreat. But she was more exultant than apprehensive, as if a little light-headed and lacking in common sense.

Then, from some distance up the garden, she saw the great pyre of rippling, scarlet light as the core of the whole dark scene. She watched till it died down.

At last, lifting her eyes, she was struck by the peculiar formation of this land seen by night. It was all in verticals. It was all pointed, all streaming upwards. The trees by the water at the foot of the garden, the poplars and the willows, stretching their deep black limbs against the misty and rusty darknesses of the hillside, scored it through with upright strokes which seemed hardly to end with their visible height but suggested a passing upwards into the sky where the eye lost them. And this lofty, fantastically elongated character of the landscape gave one a dwarfed feeling; one had a sensation of being buried in some monstrously deep place, of being deep, deep down – 'buried', 'fallen into a pit', 'lost', 'cut off', 'out of mind', 'out of hearing' – the words seemed to press forward rapidly, each presenting itself like a sharp whisper on a note of query – 'Is it this? This?' till they ran together into a single phrase, 'the bottomless pit', and the motion ceased.

Yet these words seemed still to belong only to poetry, of the solemn, apocalyptic kind, and to be attached naturally, like a caption to a picture, to that obscure view with its visionary character. This detached feeling for gloomy beauty continued while, with raised eyes, she began slowly to make her way down to the subsiding fire.

Suddenly, with the dizzying and limitless astonishment of a nightmare, she perceived that there was a building stand-

ing towards the summit of the hill, within the dark woods. She saw it very imperfectly, but what she saw made the blood sing in her head and her knees feel weak. How could there be, in that rustic spot, towering, buttressed walls, topped by arches, colonnade supporting colonnade? And, still above these, vast rotundas, from each of which was lifted up on high a long staff surmounted by a gleaming sign while, against the walls, were great staircases which branched and joined and branched again, and ascended in giant flights, at each turn of which were newels strangely shaped and crowned with finial figures, perhaps winged, though their detail was not to be discerned in that twilit air. Or were they *living beings*? Of a gigantic size, suggesting acres of walls, of a monstrous, heroic style, vaguely Aztec, Assyrian or Muscovite, shimmering in the dark air as if, having erupted on that bad spot, having been lifted on a convulsion of the earth's crust to stand under the shocked heavens, it was dripping with the white fires of the regions whence it was spewed up, it hung there as a sign before her eyes, to show whose was the kingdom, under what lordship they had come.

Ah! But now what was this? She could not of course see plainly, it was too dark. Yet surely it was a building well known to her, after all, sickeningly well known, with its big, coarse water-tower? Although enormously enlarged, supplied with fantastic detail, tricked out and overlaid with the dire distortions of nightmare, it was still to be recognized.

There was no possible site for a building of any magnitude on those little hills. Its very proportions were wrong. It was like an object stuck into a picture by an unskilled artist, too large and impossibly placed. All that was wild, fanciful, irreconcilable – everything to proclaim its dream order.

She had been dreaming on her feet.

Yet it might be, she thought, that misled by the dusk and

the fragmentary nature of her view she had actually caught a glimpse of some white Palladian mansion, empty and half-ruinous; for although all these months during which they had lived there she had never realized there was any large building on the hill opposite their garden, still it was true that the thinning woods were daily revealing a little more and a little more.

Then, manœuvring for a better view, having retraced her steps, she suddenly discovered that she had quite lost sight of any building of whatever kind; could not, evidently, hit again on that one spot from which it was to be seen.

Either that, or there was nothing there.

But even if there was nothing there, she had no need to think herself hallucinated because, with eyes still affected by the sharp fire at which she had stared so long, she had seen something on the hill, perhaps only some patch of moon-struck cloud behind the wood, shaped by the trees, which had deceived her sight.

Nevertheless, she grew dizzy; and turning thus, shaken and hot in the freezing air, contending with a wildness in the brain, 'No light in the house!' she suddenly realized, and a burst of terror near to madness seized her. She stumbled up through the garden, she stormed in, heart thumping to choke her. 'Clem!' she cried up desperately through the house in an angry, scolding voice. 'Why sit here in the dark?' she cried roughly, bursting into the middle room. Silence. Clem sat with a drooping head. Rage seized on Catherine, hatred. This wanton display of misery, as it seemed to her, *as she could not bear to do otherwise than regard it*, drove her nearly wild; and hitting out, sparing no one, 'How dreadful you optimists are when you *do* collapse!' she cried with caustic violence, as she flung the curtains along their rods. 'Your very spines seem to melt!'

She was terrified.

Yet, even now, her terror was really unformulated, in some curious fashion. All the first warnings passed unheeded.

The discovery that there was really a house on the hill strangely weakened the effect on her mind of that moment of secret illumination. That the house was not remotely like the infernal palace of her night vision of course caused her no surprise. It was built of the tawny barstone of the district, was rather large, but of commonplace appearance, and could be seen from their garden quite clearly as soon as the leaves fell.

Catherine took many solitary walks throughout the winter, tramping doggedly, often with her eyes on the ground for a half mile at a time in spite of the novelty of the scenes, feverishly attempting to enjoy what Clem would not share; and during these excursions she discovered that, even after one had made a big circuit to reach the lane on the hill, this was of a kind in which that district abounded, so deeply sunken between retaining walls that nothing of the house could be seen. She turned back. That day, at a bend, she had a glimpse of the valley and a strange, diminished view of their own little dwelling, all fascinatingly minute. Then suddenly she felt a kind of extreme elation (which perhaps merely showed at what a terrible depth her spirit had been floundering), an excited pride in this odd little ancient in their possession. Why the tragedy? Yes, why? An overwhelming tragedy made out of a small material misfortune! What a pair of fools!

The panics, the explicit warnings, all passed unheeded because only the next day up would rocket Clem's spirits and she would laugh, make jokes about the house and their catastrophe generally, declare that she had quite got over it and was not worrying any more, would run about and fall

into friendly chatter with everyone she met. Then suddenly again it was all burnt out; there were suspicious looks, accusations against neighbours, scared creeping about the house and the dreadful silence. Then up again; then down to the depths.

But the pace grew so fast and furious that it could not fail to end in a crash, as anyone must have seen – anyone but Catherine.

For in *her* mind, through whatever alarms and whatever moments of wild panic, was stubbornly fixed the idea that they, of all people, were safe. Was it not plain to anyone that they had had their share, so many years of suffering, all their youth laid waste, as much as anyone could endure? It was plain! They had worked out their heavy sentence to the last bitter hour. A second visitation of madness need not be thought of – from that, at least, they of all people must be exempt. In plain common sense, all emotional reckonings aside, it would be an impossible chance. This idea had actually come to her many years ago, after their mother's death, with a sort of blissful certainty, too. Not again.

So she was totally unable to see what was happening before her eyes. Up to the very end, she was incredulous.

'So you left her alone down there, knowing her state? A drawer with knives in it in the next room, sleeping tablets beside her of which she might have taken an overdose. And the garden door a few feet away from her bed, opening straight into the garden, with the stream and ponds – about which she had already spoken to the doctor in desperate style, about which the doctor had warned you. All that was in your knowledge; and then you went away, went upstairs, kept out of hearing. Slept peacefully, did you? Slept, anyway, so you tell us. Were you perhaps "hoping for the best"?'

Catherine answered, 'Yes, I was.'

'My question was ambiguous. Did you hope she would take one or another of those means to do away with herself?'

'How could I ever suppose she would rise from that dreadful stupor?'

Yes, she, too, would resort to ambiguity, while with deep scorn in her heart she listened to her questioners – hypocrites to a man, and from self-interest (for this one would be dismissed from the force, that one struck off the register, all in their several degrees would forfeit the trust of society and come to ruin at a breath of suspicion that they thought other-

wise) making pretence that it would not have been the greatest mercy in the world if a mad woman had killed herself. But she looked into their faces in vain for some sign of conscious hypocrisy. Could it possibly be that they were indeed such monstrous materialists, such rank sensualists, so secretly terrified at the thought of their own dissolution, so utterly despairing of a hope of heaven, that they did actually think death was the worst thing?

The words went rattling about her head, hard, tricky questions were thrust forward for her solution, as in some inane radio game. The large-windowed, shabby room to which she had been called seemed too full of light, the cold, pale, empty April sky seemed to press on the panes, sealing out air, like the inflated flank of a balloon.

'You were fully dressed when you went down the garden?'

'I had never undressed.'

'What made you get up at last? Did you hear the door?'

'I don't remember.'

But she did remember. She remembered hearing the door close, creeping out, whispering, 'Clem!' down the stairs, and then covering her ears; going into the room with the garden view, and finding that then, when at last she willed to see, she could not; flinging open the window and catching the faint sound of someone breaking through the bushes, and crying out, wild and high, like an abandoned creature, despairingly. She remembered what followed: running, darkness, breathless calling, the rippling of water, icy shocks when she plunged in up to the knees at the edge of the stream, crashing through the sharp sedges of the marshy ground, the beds of rushes shaggily bristling from the hidden pools, where already, between the upright quills, were horizontal knife-like gleams caught from the sky. She remembered blows, cuts, scratches, a sudden threshing of water, the water beaten by great wings,

a fearful blow on the face from a swinging bough, a taste of blood thereafter; the processional lights of a train duplicated in the ponds; wounds, wounds and further darkness under trees, all her breath gone with the shock when she plunged in, and then crouching by the masonry rim of the pond where there was sudden depth, and the singing, the pure, gay singing of the birds.

People had heard her cries and were coming to the rescue. Lights jogged hurriedly down the gardens, already half-quenched in the growing daylight. She stood by the pond and cried to them.

They brought her away from there at last, but she would not go with any of them into the cottage, but shut the door in their faces. She sat down, soaked, with chattering teeth, shaking uncontrollably, lancinating pain over her eyes, her hands bleeding. Yet someone, some time afterwards, got in and made her a fire, helped her to change her clothes, bathed her wounds, brought her tea. She had never known who this was. In any case, the blow had almost blinded her.

They went on searching out there in full daylight, and she said despairingly to this person, 'They'll find her, won't they? She won't do it - I'm sure she will not. She's too much afraid of physical hurt - believe me, she's quite abnormally afraid. Oh, why did I call that pack on her? They're like dogs . . .' Her helper told her incisively, 'Of course they'll find her. Then they'll take her straight to the hospital. It seems all the formalities were completed yesterday. They were to fetch her today. You remember? - yesterday you arranged everything. You yourself did it.' 'Yes!' she acknowledged.

'Why didn't you get help from the cottages?' they asked her later.

'I didn't think of anything but to save her.'

She was incapable of speaking at any length before these

questioners, or she would have assured them, pouring out all her terrible scorn of herself into the words, 'Oh, I would have saved her from drowning with the best of you! - with the best of the pack. I tell you I wanted nothing on earth but to save her, for my own sake. Because I can't do without her, she's all I have, all I can ever love properly. Without her I shall be lost. Can't you see how lost I am, now we're parted?'

They let her go. And indeed even those who had seen her gaining by her sister's death were silenced when it was found that the house was hers already and there would have been nothing else to have, for Clem's pension would have died with her. If there was a sudden space about her and she fancied censorious looks in such eyes as she met, she cared for none of it. She shut the door on everyone, rejected all help, answered no letters, ignoring even a telegram from the hospital telling her to come because Clem had had another stroke. She did not go. She had fallen into an inert, mindless state which was not calm, for it was harassed by nightmares, premonitory agitations.

Then, waking late one morning in the still brightness, she thought someone was crying aloud the name of that dire place where Clem was confined. She realized it was the voice of the cuckoo, its two soft notes sounding like the two long, rounded syllables, each with a double 'o' in it, of which that musical name was composed. She got up, suddenly wet to the very scalp in the tepid air. But the once-sweet, magical voice went on, dinning the name into her ears.

So, throughout many weeks, the artful bird kept up its abominable cry.

There were distractions, but all were terrifying. Her own position, when at last glanced at, was seen to be impossible. She had that roof over her head which was Clem's last gift to

her, and it was much. But without the means to keep anything going, either the house or herself, it looked as if she could but starve under it. So, the end of her resources being already in sight, she was driven to apply to the relevant court for some minute means of maintenance out of her sister's income. It was granted. Her case was considered, she was judged; the cold, grudging legal pronouncement allowed her that alleviation temporarily. A sponger, a hanger-on – she was branded. Yet was she really such – she who had always done all the domestic work of their household in exchange for food and lodging, while Clem had never had to soil her hands at home? Always weakly, and then with health utterly lost under the emotional strain of their mother's illness, she had not seemed able to order her life otherwise. But she could not deny it; she was 'totally without means', she was 'dependent on her sister', 'her sister had kept her'. These were the facts.

It did not matter. Lies, cruel verdicts, crazy misunderstandings, humiliations without end – none added very materially to a load already so fearfully beyond her strength.

For it had all begun again: the disorder, the uncertainty, the ravaged, provisional life, the fevers, the enervations of waiting, that imbecile treadmill to and fro between the house and the hospital, to and fro, which in itself makes the performer feel as if his brain is losing all power of concentration except on the one thing.

How long could she go on like this? Must she continue, like an automaton drawn by compulsions, to go punctually in and out of the little scarred door on the hammering road, getting always wilder in the brain, more and more derelict in appearance, more and more distracted, consumed by endless grief, till her own mind went? More and more enraged by the cruelty of heaven, the immeasurable injustice of that 'twice –

twice in a lifetime', the crazing effect of which it seemed impossible to express to any fellow-creatures.

There was only one thing to do: to come in quickly, to shut doors and windows, to stuff one's ears, to plunge into imaginative, creative work, to hear and see nothing beyond that, to acknowledge no summons, no calls upon one, to keep hidden, to lose oneself in imagined worlds. For all outside was hell.

But it could not be done, for there was 'business' to be dealt with, those grim mysteries which she had never had to attempt to grasp and now never could; there was Clem to be dealt with.

It was as well that many hours were spent perforce in the open air, in making those random hackings and weak prodings at the smothered earth by which she sought to delay the revolt of the wilderness. Having thrown away almost the last of her money, during those delirious months before the end, upon perfectly futile preparations for the making of a garden, she was now condemned, in the most ironical fashion, to labour at it all by herself in an attempt to prevent its total relapse; a gigantic toil, work fit for a navvy. For she still held in mind a picture of Clem's face at her first sight of their garden, heart-stricken; and if Clem's eyes would never look on it again, yet some grain of hope there must have been, that she worked on. Struggling there for hours at a time, soaked with sweat, terribly strained about the back and arms, she felt powerless as an insect in that monstrous green world.

Neighbours, seeing her labouring thus, like a lunatic, viewed her with scoffing amazement. 'Ah, I see your *tennis-lawn* looks as if it's going native again. I was thinking of getting out my flannels, but I doubt it'll be necessary.' To such sallies was she constantly treated across the garden-plots. She kept her head down, so as to avoid catching their

eyes. She moved like the lost one at the last. Only sometimes she would find herself standing still, gazing blankly up at the house, as if smitten with idiocy. Never had Clem come home, in the old days, and failed to call cheerfully from window or door.

Yet even this was perhaps better than brooding in the house.

This second winter she did not go out for pleasure, nor to escape, for there was no longer any hope of it. Her excursions were all enforced. Apart from these, she did not venture beyond her own boundaries. Sometimes, ceasing her mad labours, she would go down to the bottom of the garden, where she was concealed from neighbourly eyes, for a few minutes' respite.

Whenever the rain ceased, the mist rose, the valley steamed. Under screen of one such white and blinded day towards the end of the winter, she loitered at the foot of the garden amongst the great mat of vegetation which even in its decay still smothered the earth. Everything dripped, rotted, was studded with drops. All the wreckage of autumn was still there. The shocks of grass lay this way and that, and within their troughs the small, black, leathery leaves of the willows were disposed in shoals. Tall stalks, rigid and brown, leaned at all angles, with umbels from which the seeds had dropped withered and shrunk to a spidery delicacy. Rosy and rotting apples still nested in the grass. Some were eaten to shells; others, concealed, burst underfoot, crunching unpleasantly. The little stream ran swiftly, its waters dull and dark, carrying a flotilla of bubbles with bleared, white surfaces, which marked the racing pace of the current. The mist hid the hills. The ash tree on the opposite bank imposed its splendid, looped, cursive design on a wall of whiteness; its thick, sparse branches seemed to droop of their own weight

and hung down motionless, with a look of being drawn with a full brush in a grey, watery medium. The blind air was silent. No bird raised a cry.

There she stood leadenly, weighted to the earth, with the memory of that hideous Judas scene in the obdurate wilderness, hearing the hunt draw near.

A FLYING swan glided out of the mist. It came silently, drooping its head and wings to the water, so close to her that she met its black eye frowning from the dark berry which makes a swan's glance irate and menacing.

Startled, she looked up after it, and thus did not notice the man on the opposite bank until he stepped out of the bushes directly before her. Then she could not turn quickly enough to avoid an appearance of flight.

She did everything to avoid her neighbours nowadays, sickened by the shameless, probing curiosity which she felt to have burst out all round her in the spring. But this man she took to be a stranger. At least she did not remember to have seen him before, a middle-aged man with the air of belonging to an educated class and in any case she could not avoid him, for he called out to her at once in a nasal, authoritative voice, 'You have a problem, with that ground.'

She saw no reason to humour him, for she fancied that he was amused and joking cruelly or tactlessly. 'Can't you see it has already been dealt with?' she could only return in irony. But his answer seemed serious.

'Pooh, you went the wrong way about it. It was no good

thinking to make a lawn down there. Besides, those drains you've had to put in are useless, they'll go to pieces at the first frost. They're too near the surface, you should have had soil imported. Since we're neighbours, allow me to offer you a little neighbourly advice.'

She had no wish to carry on the conversation, but as he had come right down to the bank and stood there facing her squarely across the water, she felt obliged to remain; and then he told her what could be done for the ground, how it might be transformed, in time, into a delightful garden. She listened with interest, in spite of herself, though making no response.

Meanwhile, she studied him. Perhaps it was the deadened light, or else some gleam off the water, which imparted a glistening look to his yellowed skin; or he might have been sweating from some unusual exertion. She was close enough to observe, with disconcerting particularity, a face of a receding type, in which the close-set eyes were small, bright and black, and seemed peculiarly piercing, while the large, thick nose jutted out thrustingly and the large, sensual mouth had the lines of a faint sneer and disclosed big, ugly teeth. So that the thought, 'He looks like a dog grinning,' struck her fleetingly. A wet, grinning dog, come panting up out of the sedges – but without examining this thought or tracing its origin, she pushed it sharply away.

She did not even trouble to praise his scheme, convinced that he knew how little she could afford to carry it out.

However, he went on, 'There are few more charming spots than a well-managed water-garden. You have a situation there where many unusual and delectable plants could be got to flourish. That soil is bursting with richness – it's acid as a marsh, but it only needs treatment. Ah, I see you feel

it would be too much of an undertaking?' She vaguely moved her head, and then, looking across, had the queer sight of him throwing up one hand with a curiously florid gesture. 'Believe me,' he said, 'you could make that ground blossom like the rose!'

This unexpected phraseology, and the whole moment with its air of exaggeration and falsity, made a disagreeable impression on her. She turned away.

'Well, come now,' he called, immediately dropping this tone for a highly prosaic, bargaining one. 'Come now! Look here, I would make you an offer for that ground – and take the house off your hands, too, at break-up price. I'm about to build here in the valley, and a road driven straight up that plot and coming out close on the high street –. Ground in that state's of little value – you know that, of course?'

She was startled and, uttering the words which had so often beaten about in her mind, exclaimed, 'Why, it would leave me in the gutter. Do you think I stay here from choice? Yes, everyone must think so!'

'Oh, you'd still get maintenance through the Court of Protection,' he said carelessly and as if perfectly informed about all their business. 'What made you buy the place, eh? I spoke to your surveyor-fellow when he came to look over it for you – when was it? – summer before last. You paid a swingeing fancy price for that house – I told him so – didn't he warn you? The young Ransoms would never have stuck out for it, they'd have dropped hundreds without a murmur –' and he gave a brief, appreciative laugh. 'Why, damn the fellow, what was his game? Wanted to oblige the little woman, eh?'

She did not even take all this in, but to end it said hastily, 'Two years ago, that would have been helpful.'

'But perhaps I can help you now?'

'If you mean the house, I'm not in a position to sell. You can have no other interest in our affairs.'

'But,' he answered, smiling, his loose, wide mouth again stretching into a grin, disclosing those big, strong teeth, 'of course all your neighbours must feel considerable interest in the owner of old Flytton's cottage, as they call it! Do you know the tradition is that the old man was a "sin-eater"?''

She was silent, from distress, attributing to him now the usual malice.

She returned up the garden but, having gone a little way, came to a halt among the frames of the great weeds, suddenly amazed at herself for having failed to catch at this hand which had been extended, perhaps actually in help. For a moment her spirits soared crazily at the bare idea of escape from this abhorred scene of their judgment; for a moment she only saw that help had been offered. She had been repelled by the man at sight. Yet his manner had been reasonably friendly, and of course she saw clearly, now, that he could never have uttered even his last, smiling words in the same spirit as that of the cottage people – only a rough and limited mind could have found amusement in her plight. And she actually turned and scrambled through the thickets again, looking eagerly towards the bank of the stream. But he was gone.

At that, a light changed, the blighting truth overwhelmed her. 'Am I losing my senses? What possible object could this man have for *helping* me?' Suddenly all the tips of her nerves seemed to recoil as if she had only just avoided yet another trap. This impression was so overpowering that her muscles stiffened, she felt really afraid to move lest the ground should give way or some crashing blow fall from behind on her skull; almost afraid to look lest some further dire discovery should meet her eye; such a miasma of betrayal

and black treachery did the whole place breathe at her. Conspiracy was all around her, she could not see the detail, but had a confused, shadowy picture of many persons whispering and conspiring to Clem's and her own ruin.

With a shudder, she saw the path she was on and tried to reach safer ground.

She touched cautiously the great decorative heads of the seeding angelicas. Her deliberately exploring eye fell to the roots, fell then upon a hole full of the stagnant, iridescent water, on the surface of which floated the reddish scum of the barstone – a foul, evil-looking puddle, in which some filthy rubbish was embedded. The sky, then, the feathery tree-tops in the pure, soft mist –

But suddenly the thought she had been trying to suppress was in full view. It came quietly, under the figure of the match, the lighted match, the little mischievous, weak agent, behind which and as if lighted by it, appeared Hungerford's pale, weakly handsome face, wearing the cold, bored smile she had more than once noticed with uneasiness and pained affront.

Before the final catastrophe, she had begun to reason things out and to see Hungerford's conduct in its true perspective: something to be mildly despised, best dismissed from the mind once and for all; a thing one would not care to have done oneself, yet a piece of human fallibility not to be judged too weightily.

But her sense of proportion was no longer true. It had warped under a strain too terrible to be borne without deep injury. 'Didn't he warn you? . . . What was his game?' One instant of this, and then, as if a great collection of inflammable matter had been heaped up, a little more and a little more, her whole mind burst into a red flare of rage. 'One word – only one word of warning – and that costing him

nothing!' With a great effort of will, she tremblingly attempted to concentrate upon the linear beauties of the tangle of branches against the sky, and to think of that alone. But a fearful heat was in her head, her limbs were shaking, and she went up through the garden she did not know now – like a mad creature, perhaps, talking to herself, all but crying out, and moving her hands helplessly.

And without even waiting till she was calmer, she began to write, with a hand that trembled, a long, wild letter to Mrs Forrester. But how could she give intelligible expression to that atmosphere of hell into which they had dropped at that time – the fearful change really impossible to describe except in the words 'there was no more pity' and 'people did what they liked with us'?

Still she wrote. Still she sought to reduce the pain by crying out. She covered two pages, but hardly legibly, and sentence after sentence rose to a climax, then broke off, stifled, like a voice choked with passion, as if the thing had become unspeakable, beyond expression altogether. She saw that it was so at last. Then she dropped her pen and sat resting her forehead on her fists, trying to see things clearly.

But that could only result in a frightfully vivid picture of Clem and herself waiting in the middle room.

THEY had been ready far too soon and had been waiting a long while in the room on the road level, because from there they could keep a watch on the road. At last the car drew up, and this, then, was the consultant psychiatrist from the hospital, this big, florid, youngish man, a Scotsman, as one could guess at a glance. He got out and was met by their own doctor. And then they could watch while the two stood chatting and smiling for a few minutes before turning to the door – and what behaviour could have been more natural? To be fair, it was obligatory.

She said to Clem, raging, 'Shall I kick them out? Shall I send them packing? I will if you like. Shall I? Shall I? Shall I? After all, they couldn't do anything about it –' But could they not? Was that right? Was it in reality too late? Had she the power now? Did it lie with her any more? And what could she do with Clem thereafter – what could she do left alone with one who could not eat, sleep or answer? She had already been warned that the police might be brought into it – for of course Clem had spoken of wishing to be dead, as they always did. The questions cracked like whips, making her brain spin – to not one of them could she

supply any sort of answer. 'What shall I do?' she cried out helplessly.

But it was not that she was really expecting any decision from the figure which sat there huddled in the chair in the corner, defenceless against anything one might inflict on it, with frightened eyes which seemed to have gone blank and childish, yet fixed themselves on one with that terrible expression, so that one could not but know that the brain behind them was, most fearfully, not incapable of thoughts but only incapable of words, of action. 'But you cannot go on like this!' Catherine cried, in a harsh, angry voice, wringing her hands.

She saw that she must open the door. Glowering silently, suddenly finding herself unable to utter a civilized greeting, she let the two in. So perhaps he was justified in asking in that smiling but already somewhat touchy manner, 'Which is my patient?' while giving her the famous medical stare which sized her up as another case in the making. Human dislike was in the air and not on her side only. Still, the interview somehow got under way.

'Now, come, you have nothing to be afraid of,' he said to Clem, smoothly, the words reassuring, but his tone was charged with menace – it could not be otherwise! And then he compelled brief answers from her, like one who knew how to quell sick wills.

Catherine looked at the man's smiling face and blazed with hatred, not of him as an individual (him she could almost pity) but of what he represented; and she could barely keep the violent contempt out of her voice.

In this place he proposed for Clem was it possible to have a private room? Yes, such a room was sometimes to be had, he answered ambiguously, still with that air of grim knowledge reserved from them – and suddenly, with terrible emo-

tion, she saw that cell with the high, barred window in which their mother had been placed for a time, and then did not dare to glance at Clem; while he went on to say that it must depend on what he considered best for his patient. But, he said, with the menace doubled, in no case could one expect to be private. Nowhere could one be private in this beautiful institution of his, of which he seemed almost ingenuously proud, speaking of it with sincere satisfaction. But a place where one can never be alone? Ah, but if that strikes you as unbearable, as really hellish, that's because you look at things in a wrong way, your outlook is gravely wrong, it's unsocial, the greatest crime in a herd animal. By which he meant no wiser a thing than that it was not *his* outlook.

Then, stung to fury by this insolent rubbish, and by his too visible enjoyment in giving them their first lesson in submission, Catherine broke into abuse of the hospital, crudely expressed, raw with passion; and at that, very dryly yet smiling, indulging her, like someone very sure of himself who could afford to make the kill at his leisure, he observed that he would much like to hear just what her experience of such places had been. Did she really know anything at all about them? Come, now!

She had thought their doctor would have explained. She gave him the facts in half a dozen words, and, sneering, added, 'Did you think I had been reading Snake-pit stories?' But one should never thus cry, in effect, 'You fraud!' – it costs too much. Now it appeared that to be caught out and made to feel a bit of a fool was not nothing to this man; his self-importance was visibly wounded; for an instant he was deflated and his anger was plain. He would not forget this trifling wound to his vanity, although he turned it off suavely enough, saying, 'Your experience may account to *some extent* for your prejudices.' And, no, it was not said in irony;

damned custom had brassed him so that he was able to make such a comment as that without ironical intention.

But if they felt they knew better than he did, and could do better without the help of trained people of vast experience, by all means let them try.

Nevertheless, what was she to do? How could she deprive Clem of that chance of recovery, however faint, which she was told many new treatments held out?

When the two were gone, she had begun that distracted turning over of their private things, with some frantic idea of escape for them both in her mind. But while she was thus engaged, their own doctor, a pleasant woman, genuinely sympathetic, took the trouble to call again simply to have a kind, encouraging little talk with her. There were wonderful new treatments nowadays, there were many wonderful cures, everything was quite different from what it had been in their mother's time – even the law more merciful. If Clem did not like it, she could come back – one had only to get the doctor's permission!

It was unbelievable now, yes, it was unbelievable that a crazy excitement should thereupon have seized on her, that she should have been carried along on a wave of mad hope, hope which was quite wild, throwing her into a state almost of light-heartedness. That she should have had an anticipation of good to come – should have been eager not only to send Clem away but to get her to that fount of healing *quickly!* That she should have thought, 'Yes, she will be cured. God has seen and taken into account, even at this eleventh hour, that we have had our share. She will recover – just as they say – even as they say! *I must not mind her eyes.*'

In short, such trembling, incapable hands could only bungle, she could only see with eyes filmed with terror and judge with a brain temporarily very little sounder than the

sick one's own. So it was done. Arrangements were made, she signed what was put before her. Then all was ready for the morrow, the April morning. But on the last night, the mood collapsed.

The events of that morning had of course prevented her from going with Clem to the hospital to see her settled. She did not know what they had done with her till weeks later. Then she found her lost in a ward of noisy lunatics. And when she protested that there had been a half-promise of a private room, she was told with finality that it was 'not worth while to move her'. For they had found that Clem was finished, too sick for any treatment, too sick physically; an incurable case, soon to be put into a ward for the hopeless.

Now what could the betrayer, the Judas-sister say to those friends, those reproachful or indignant friends, who later demanded to know why on earth she had put Clem into such hands, she with her experience, she who knew what those places were like and how much hope there really was, she who had not the excuse of ignorance. She who, of all people, should have known what that cheerful chatter about cures amounted to. She who should have known that these poor sick ones eat at last when they are hungry - that there is never any need to panic and lose one's head because they refuse food. She could only have written, by way of answer, the truth. 'I did it because I am a despicable, nervous creature and because I was beside myself.'

A VISION, gradually gaining in clarity, of the round, fair face of Mrs Forrester with a very bewildered look in its candid eyes, warned her that cries from the pit would be lost.

For to whom had she been pouring out her soul in this frantic fashion? A woman whom she hardly knew, whom she had for many years refused to know intimately, whose last letters she had rudely ignored, in her stricken state. It was not herself, it was Clem who had been Mrs Forrester's friend.

Even at that, a little cooling in this friendship had begun towards the last. Finding the cottage what it was, Clem had avoided the Forresters, those helpful friends through whom they had been put in contact with Hungerford, who had therefore been the unwitting cause of the disaster. She had simply not known what to say to them. Kind, upright, benevolent people as they were, they could only be deeply shocked, really horrified, if ever they should learn what had come of their intervention. Besides, they were intimate friends of the Hungerfords. So that Clem, shrinking from giving hurt, with characteristic tenderness, had gone as much in fear of an encounter with these amiable people as if she

had been burdened with a shameful secret. In fact, it had become just that in her sick mind: a cause of bitter shame. It had seemed to Catherine a childish resort, akin to hiding one's head in the sand, to keep averting proposed meetings; they were bound to come to an explanation sooner or later. It was indeed a childish resort, but all that Clem was capable of at that final hour.

Not seeing this, Catherine had merely felt that these friends were being avoided and put off to a degree which they must find exceedingly odd.

Clem, however, had not been able to prevent Mrs Forrester from paying one brief, unsolicited visit to the cottage at the beginning.

The day had been sunny, all the windows open, old Flytton's pipe was not in evidence; the house had looked its best, flooded with sunshine, its seductions spread and its rottenness hidden; had looked, in fact, as Clem and Catherine had had the misfortune to see it on each occasion of 'viewing' it – a delightfully quaint little house, a 'house of character', that phrase which of course everyone was inspired to use. And Mrs Forrester, a very feminine woman, charmingly oblivious to structural problems, had been enchanted, happily amused at the picturesque little place; all the more readily enchanted, Catherine had fancied, because she had been slightly worried at her friend's peculiar reserve. There had been a little mystification. She had no doubt feared something wrong, and, overjoyed to find, as it seemed to her, that her premonitions were groundless, was doubly pleased and inclined to make the best of all she saw. She saw nothing against the cottage but its position on the road – she *did* think that very undesirable, expressing mild astonishment at their choice. And the dubiety which perhaps showed through Clem's forced spirits could be attributed to this un-

fortunate detail. Mrs Forrester had rather dwelt upon it, curiously, as if gently to tax them with a degree of folly. But it was, after all, a minor point. No doubt she had gone home and given the most comfortable account possible to her husband. Henry Forrester was an unworldly, bookish man. He had availed himself of Hungerford's talents in the matter of building a house, to his own complete satisfaction, and was the kind of man henceforth to swear by Hungerford.

Mrs Forrester had not come again, being pointedly uninvited. Correspondence had dropped also, with a touch of pained offence on her side. And Catherine, many months afterwards, had informed her briefly and belatedly of Clem's tragedy.

For of course letters had come for Clem, and their senders had had to be answered, however briefly; and the answers were always followed by further letters of shocked enquiry. Letters, letters and letters, with the same anguishing facts to be repeated. Catherine's replies were curt and churlish, giving the bare facts, refusing help, putting off visits of investigation, at last requesting outright that no one should come near her. Finding herself thus surrounded by Clem's friends, people quite uncongenial to herself, she had felt it intolerable. All were burningly anxious to help, all were, of course, as helpless as herself. Some little time went by before they saw this bitter truth. But at last in their several attitudes – shocked silence, gloomy sadness, tearful consternation – they had gradually withdrawn.

There were few indeed who, like Margaret Forrester, had shown themselves ready to help even Catherine herself (in spite of herself) for poor Clem's sake, remembering that she was their friend's tenderly cared for sister.

Catherine knew how most of them regarded her. She had sensed the judgment in the eyes of these people, or had read

it between the lines of what they had written – the measuring, cautiously appraising look which had said as plainly as words, 'If it had been *you*, we could have understood it.' For she (so they had reasoned) was the unbalanced one, the one marked out for mental catastrophe; she was the one whom melancholy had marked for its own. She, in short, was eminently one of those women whom everyone expects to become odd one day.

But of course they were wrong; she herself perceived that the chronic form of the disease keeps out its ravaging counterpart. It is rarely the oddity who becomes insane. It is not a question, for the eccentric, of travelling further down the line to reach madness. The lines are different.

Yes, she constituted an awkward problem for these good folk, as she well understood; she was nobody's business, none of them liked her, she had never been friendly with any of them. She was cruelly aware that most of them felt she had spoiled Clem's life, that some certainly believed she was a good part of the cause of Clem's illness.

Yet it was remembered that, although an unfortunate and deplorable person, she had been unaccountably cherished by their poor, lost friend.

Such no doubt had been Mrs Forrester's feeling.

But her letters of sympathy and advice had gone unanswered, her offers of help had been ignored.

This was the woman who had cause to be offended with her, to whom Catherine, after discarding her first raving letter, wrote a second in a light, untruthful, entirely unnatural style, to the end of which she suddenly tacked on this savage paragraph:

'How are the Hungerfords? I feel we owe a great deal to Mr Hungerford, and I am sure Clem never expressed her feelings properly, owing to her state, and would have liked me to

do some little thing to show our gratitude. It's a good while ago, it should have been done before, of course, but I have plenty of excuse for having neglected it. Can you suggest anything?'

And she ran out immediately and posted this letter, still in her torn and earthy garden coat and with wild hair and soiled hands, trembling with rage.

Ten minutes later, she was sitting sadly by her fire in a wretched state of dismay.

Then she tried to soothe herself, saying perhaps it was not so bad, she could not clearly remember, and probably Mrs Forrester, anyway, would not realize it was not written in good faith; and as for the last paragraph, which she remembered with perfect distinctness, word for word, the only person who could properly have assessed that pious desire to show gratitude, Hungerford himself, would certainly never see or hear of it, for Mrs Forrester would hardly treat such an overstrained sense of gratitude seriously.

So no great harm was done.

But she remained cold and sunken in her mind, like a person who has suffered a shock, looking askance at herself, sitting for a long while in the middle room between the two dark staircases, listening to the many doubtful creakings of the ancient house, and now and again hearing a dead leaf scud along the pavement past her door, like the slur of a light step drawing near home. It was turning very cold, and a bitter wind was pouring through all the crevices.

She sat there a long time before a small fire, listening to the wind, hardly thinking. Only she felt dully, 'Well, I make no apology. I need it! I need an outlet. I am a creature in need.'

ON the next day, lifting her eyes to the window, she noticed with a great feeling of apprehension, the soft, pallid light bathing the under-surfaces of the window-frame. It had been snowing slightly since early morning, and the snow was now settling.

A deep orange-black hue gradually gathered in the sky and at last the snow fell in a powdery blizzard which blew over the valley ceaselessly for many silent hours. Days passed, the lake turned black, its surface froze, and in freezing was curled by the wind, and the snow lodged in the concentric crusts. The little black forms of birds could be descried running diligently over the wide bottom of the valley, over the locked earth; these small, agitated figures, in shuttling motion wherever the eye rested, betrayed the desperate cruelty in the scene of silent whiteness. Towards sunset on the third day a faint, crimson light struck the snow surfaces. She came in, frozen and bitter from a journey and, going to draw the curtains when it was almost dark, saw a queer sight. In the staring garden, a young cat kept by a neighbour was frolicking – a crazy, furry silhouette which boxed, rolled, tumbled and sent the dry snow flying – and, watching

this macabre ballet, which seemed to express delight in the cruel, death-dealing scene, she felt as if witnessing a creature's transmutation into a toothed and clawed devilkin.

Then she sat down and wrote – but not as she had last written. With much uncertainty, she made up an advertisement offering accommodation to 'a middle-aged woman, preferably one with artistic tastes', meaning to have it inserted in various papers and journals which seemed likely, in her ignorant reckoning, to come to the eyes of people of the type she had in mind; a type she admitted to herself only with a gloss of irony, for it was positively raffish by any standards of the past.

That world of respectability in which she had lived all her life, that anaemic, sober, conventional existence which had suited Clem perfectly but in which she herself was all wrong, bored, apart, melancholy, having nothing to say for herself, silent, unfriendly and thus disliked and therefore judged – in this curious fashion she had at last repudiated it. Coarse food was all she could hope for now by this belated move towards a freer, more vigorous society, yet it might be food of the right kind.

Much to her concern – for of course she had at once been seized by misgivings – with an unlooked-for and highly unwelcome promptness the single advertisement she had ventured produced an answer. A large, decorative writing, at the same time strong and careless, informed her that her correspondent was a professional artist who required accommodation for some months in the country, and otherwise gave her no idea of what she must expect. Catherine pondered long and dubiously over the powerful scrawl; she had no gift to read its character, but she was not blind to the fact that, unwittingly or deliberately, her correspondent was curiously reticent. Some elderly eccentric of the arty kind?

Certainly someone who was no brilliant success in her profession, since she sought such modest quarters. The address was a London one, but Catherine did not know the character of the area, only had some idea that it was one of those doubtful districts pullulating with Jews, like Bayswater where it verges on Paddington. The woman had come down in life, one might imagine, and perhaps had fallen to - But here imagination failed. Catherine was ignorant of the resources open to the minor artist.

Fearing (and hoping) that her correspondent was in search of country peace, she hastened to reply, giving full details of the house and its situation on the main road, and inviting an inspection before any arrangement should be made. A slapdash card clinched the bargain unconditionally.

Catherine was now alarmed at what she had done. Certainly this fellow-creature, who already seemed to be drawing near her door, would prove to be hopelessly antipathetic, would perhaps turn out to be the bane of her life, a terrible encumbrance; for she might well find it fairly impossible to rid herself of such a waif if she chose to hang on, one who was probably without home and without friends, without alternative shelter.

Then she grew calmer. She had not hoped for much, after all. She had realized that fate might send her something very odd indeed by way of a companion, and that by addressing herself to such a wayward class she had doubled the risk. Most probably some tiresome eccentric would be foisted upon her, that was all; anything downright noxious did not seem likely. And who could do *her* any harm? She had nothing to lose; no money and no peace of mind. Those who have nothing to lose at least can hope to gain the delights of hell,

It sent a premonitory quiver through her nerves, that knock at the street-door for which she had been listening. Running up the staircase, she felt a weakness at her knees. A variety of sage reflections occurred to her in that instant of time, and a full recognition of the folly of what she had done; and she turned the latch with a faltering hand.

A small person stood before her, a small young woman. Indeed, so young a woman that at first sight Catherine took this to be a chance call coinciding with the one she was expecting. Then the girl said, with vivacious friendliness, 'Well, here I am, my dear. Emmy Rivers.'

Catherine opened the door wide with a few welcoming words, uttered she hardly knew how, for she was attempting to adjust herself to the unimagined, the unimaginable. 'Oh, I'd have come to meet you,' she managed to say in a normal tone, 'but you didn't tell me your train, you know.'

With a clasping of the hands, with a delighted smile, not with tongue alone, the young woman expressed intense gratification that Catherine had intended so kindly by her. What was it? Something which had seen the business side of the footlights? Catherine thought so.

But really by what standard could she judge this creature who stepped lightly down into her room with something of the demeanour of a young cat in a new home, as it immediately struck her, the big, gleaming eyes intent and the movements of the graceful body suggesting, in some obscure, half-comical manner, ingratiating and sinuous rubbings along the walls and furniture? Of course, an entirely pleasant, indeed, a delightful little cat.

In another minute, however, overcoming the shock of the impact, and looking with feelings less heightened and eyes which no longer exaggerated from apprehension, she saw a normal enough young woman, a little older than she had at first supposed, with a thin, bright, if somewhat anxious face. This small face, at her own rather tardy smile, instantly responded with so broad a flash of humour and liveliness that it was almost a laugh. And a laugh it became the next moment, and a catchy chuckle, too, rather deep. Emmy briefly gave herself up to merriment. But this was quickly subdued and replaced by a tone of earnest enthusiasm.

'What a lovely little outfit you have here! All real antique, I judge. Look at those immense beams! Oh, I do hope I shall suit you, dear. My one awful fear is in case you find me allergic. Well, this is a wonderful little abode, is it not! Oh, I can't help laughing, though – when I think how I was picturing it. To think I did fear it might be otherwise than I could wish! And look at you! Oh, d'you know, you're just what I pictured you – just what I hoped you'd be!'

'I thought perhaps you might stay, if you cared to, for a week as my guest, to see how you like it,' Catherine found voice to say.

An additional sparkle crowded itself into the small countenance. Again a little stagily, a gesture with clasped and lifted hands indicated rapture.

Nevertheless, the young woman now took an earnest tone, the tone of one who well knew what it was which made the wheels of friendship go round. 'Oh, it's all right by me! Make no mistake, the whole outfit's just my dream come true! So if it's all right by you, I'll put it straight down, say for a fortnight, shall I?' And with some eagerness she produced her handbag (Catherine thought, as if to win over a suspicious landlady). 'Emmeline's my proper name – but I do prefer, and no wonder, to be called Emmy. And here we have my props.' The young woman had dumped down by the wall a battered tin box of the kind to contain artist's materials, a small, bulging, shabby portfolio and a plastic shopping-bag, also bulging. 'The rest of my stuff's to follow. Thought I'd wait and see if all's in order. Well, now, I do hope I'm not a nasty surprise in any way? Sure, dear? I know you did say "middle-aged", more or less, and I'm not that, when you face it, though I'm not so far off as you'd perhaps think, either – twenty-three! "The very thing for me," I said when I saw your little ad – which I did quite by chance, Mumsie having gone arty at the bookstall. My eye just fell on your little piece, just when I was saying to myself, "if I don't take off before long, she'll murder me." (Explain later.) You can only call it a miracle! I'll explain it all as soon as you've got a moment to spare. I'm not a gabby type, I hope you do believe, in the ordinary way. I hate a gabby type – and the sharp eyes were on Catherine – and I can see you do.'

Her vivid little face was all in motion as the girl talked. The darting eyes which seemed anxious to miss nothing, the eyebrows suggestive of antennae, so slender they were and so active, the flexible nostrils of the little hawk-nose, and that most fascinating mouth, the big, mobile, thin-lipped mouth always twisting and disporting itself zestfully over the slight twang of commonness, never inexpressive even when

shut, with its restless corners – this lively assortment of features gathered into one small countenance seemed to overcrowd it with vivacities. Nor could one look at her without those eyes coming slyly to meet one's own, all sharp consciousness. Then one noticed that they were faintly oblique and full-lidded, as if of eastern ancestry, although they were not dark to match the coarse, raven hair but a yellow hazel. And indeed the hawk-nose looked suspiciously like a little sprightly version of the Jewish nose.

Not a foolish face, by any means.

Yet the chatter flowed. And how delighted she was with everything about her, how utterly amazed at the quaintness, the weirdness of it all! Such thrills, such raptures – decidedly they were a little larger than life, and betrayed conscious art.

Catherine ran downstairs. She went down to get the tea, leaving her guest to tidy herself.

Putting the final touches to the tea-tray, she was obliged to trust that all was right, for she was quite unable to give her mind to it properly, while her hands shaking in agitation made her clumsy. She even glanced at herself in the square of looking-glass and met the image without her usual resignation. She was not far off panic. For looking back over the piled, complex, isolating agony of the past year, she could not think how she was to explain herself; her situation seemed terribly intricate and confused, beyond even her own grasp, and the problem seemed suddenly too much for her. So she stood there, fiddling senselessly with the tray, lost, like an idiot, with wandering eyes and a hard frown. 'And to speak of Clem – impossible!'

Then relief came with the thought, 'Why explain at all?' and her tension dropped.

For the rest, what a type! Yet she had made up her mind to take whatever came to her. She now recognized that the

base of this practical-looking and philosophical-seeming measure of taking a lodger had never been the necessity for money or anything but the recklessness of despair and an instinctive attempt to save her sanity. Standing with the teapot in her hand, she felt the folly of her proceedings as something which deserved castigation; she listened to the voice of a hard-headed judgment which should have come easily to one of her blood and upbringing. A disreputable young woman! Wasn't she?

Then she laughed. 'Well, it will do,' she thought, snapping her fingers derisively under the nose of sobriety. 'Yes, it will do very nicely.'

Indeed, there was now a question as to whether the outcome was not much as she had secretly desired. For certainly she had not wanted a friend, anyone of her own kind, even, or of the kind to which she had once belonged, between whom and herself the air would have been weighted with immeasurable tragedy, inescapably; she had not wanted anyone who *knew*. She had wanted someone to whom she need not talk of things too bad to talk about. A place where her sickened mind could rest, cast off its load and think lightly. Relaxation, she wanted.

So now that the cruel shock of the first moment was past, her first sense of outrage at this crashing in upon her private suffering of a frivolous, laughing theme had yielded to a kind of furtive, bad-conscienced excitement. She did not imagine that she was here offered an escape from hell or a means of salvation. This sudden ironical intrusion of a clowning note upon a lightless stage, like a giggle breaking in at a moment of human agony – was it not to be expected of the place where they were? *Hell has its diversions*. And surely they could not be otherwise than thus – frivolous, trumpery, blackguardly, of no great depth of turpitude, simply the froth

of evil; and for laughter, a vulgar snickering; yet diversions, for all that. Oh, yes, and tempting ones.

Her mood swung over into a reckless pleasure at the thought of the girl. She recalled her person with those beguiled sensations which youth and beauty arouse in their own right. A charming thing, a pleasure to see, a joy! A brilliant, chattering bird. She used scented phrases here which she had never been accustomed to use.

'Well, in any case, a bird of passage obviously. I shall not be exposed to the effects for long.'

At the very worst - But one look at her guest, one feel of that young woman's texture, as it were, disposed once and for all of the natural suspicion awakened by a young woman seeking a few months' modest retirement. Wide-awake, if ever a girl was, Miss Rivers would play her no such trick as that.

MEANWHILE, the young woman she had let in had gone lightly up the stairs, as directed, and then, left to herself in the upper region, was more than ever like a cat exploring a new home. She prowled, soft-footed. She peeped hither and thither, her big and glistening eyes very wide open and looking dark above the low illumination of a bedside lamp. She peered behind doors and under the legs of furniture; she seemed to snuff the air, she rubbed the stuffs of the draperies between slim, ready fingers, she patted the beds. She stared searchingly into the depths of the mirror, as if with a kind of primitive intent and like a creature not understanding the properties of a looking-glass and expecting to see within that hollow oval something not visible in the room. Now and again a brief whisper escaped her. 'God 'a mercy!' 'A bad break, Emmy, my poor lass.' And the acute, guileful little face appeared alternately at the two windows, wide-eyed, surveying the traffic whizzing by at a distance of a few feet on the one hand, the valley now sunk in night on the other. She thought nothing of the traffic; but at the other view, deep, branchy, still arbitrarily patterned by the dwindled strips of snow which gave it a sort of ghostly

visibility, she appeared lost in dubious wonder.

Altogether, some quality in her situation seemed to amaze her, to the point of alarm. Indeed, if Emmy had shrieked with rapture, it might well have been only to prevent herself from shrieking with consternation.

Certain features seemed to her downright forbidding. Catherine was by no means a deeply domesticated woman, but she had prepared the house with thoroughness to welcome her guest, and everything was austere clean and stood in order. 'Bathroom like on the first day in Paradise' – Emmy skimpily used snowy towels, scentless soap. She appeared to observe this spotless condition of things in particular with uneasiness, for she glanced at her shoes. She had no slippers with her, so she moved on tip-toe.

All she did, however, she did very rapidly; then stood an instant critically surveying herself – her furbished if unwashed face, her smoothed hair, and the small, frilled tea-apron which she had tied on. She had bought the apron in the town as she came from the station. It was as if the little stray cat had bought itself a collar and bell, in order to make a meekly domesticated impression. The apron indicated that Emmy was prepared to wash up, for instance. It was the apron over which she lingered longest. She did not know whether it was not really a bit much. She would chance it.

Actually, she had not bought it from guile, but because she was truly at a loss in these surroundings. It was at the station, with its elms and rookery, its loud thrush and its view over the Lammas-lands, that she had begun to experience those qualms and misgivings, and to feel badly at sea, and altogether to lose her grip a bit, as she expressed it to herself. She had never imagined living in such a place, not actually *living*. It was the sort of place one passed through in a train or coach.

What, she asked herself, did this old Judy want of her? A companion? A slave? A victim? A friend? Or was she simply in need of the wherewithal?

Queer little body with crooked shoulders – something a bit wrong with her spine, perhaps – and with the dark, sunken eye, the terrible frown, the voice which seemed out of practice, which she seemed hardly able to raise, being inclined to mutter. And dressed in clothes not bad in themselves, of good, expensive stuff, but which obviously had never been bought for her, and of such a fashion – ! Well, such as to be almost impressive. Looking, too, as if she might be a bit of a tartar on occasion. Emmy didn't mind this last item, as some might have done; she was used to tartars and had developed a pliancy, a rubber-like durability, which was proof against the capers of the worst of them. 'Better when she lays on a smile, however. Quite a surprise, in fact.' Still, tartars are like that, as Emmy well knew. Often they have charm.

In short, she could no more size up Catherine Hare than Catherine could size up her; and that she was puzzled spoke well for her intelligence. Almost any other girl of her age would have taken one look at Catherine and dismissed her as a poor old thing without past or future.

Emmy made no such mistake.

She was not impressed as most young people would have been; she was impressed in a peculiar manner. Dramatic presentments and exaggerated lineaments of character, masks, their owners' stock in trade, which concealed no equivalent emotion – Emmy was used to these. She had been brought up in a society singularly tolerant of eccentrics. She regarded her hostess with provisional respect. More than one well-feathered old party she had seen who had lived like a miser and dressed with an incredible contempt of fashion and

value, and sometimes of cleanliness. *This* one, though, she thought, was not unkempt; and a touch of queerness did not scare Emmy. She was not daunted on those grounds.

But what had bothered her from the beginning was her distinct impression that she had got into the wrong drawer. She was a young woman of many experiences, but an experience of respectability and careful housekeeping was not among them. And that did make her uneasy. She felt like a child. She didn't want to be turfed out straight away for some sort of bad behaviour, like a dirty puppy. That would be awkward. Yet she couldn't quite make up her mind what number to put on.

In spite of herself, it was the child anxious to make a good impression who appeared, with confiding, ingratiating smile, upon the kitchen stairs; and that bright, strained gaze with the shade of anxiety traceable in it moved Catherine to the most generous estimate. One had a natural impulse to stroke the little cat and make it at home.

Emotional warmth, as well as a somewhat dubious excitement, animated her voice now as she invited Emmy to the tea-table: 'You must be cold and tired.'

Tea! Emmy swooped upon this comfortable, intelligible overture with rapture. The young girl with a good appetite would do for the time being. But in fact in this role Emmy was pretty natural.

'I'LL tell you all about myself, if you like,' Emmy began. 'For I expect you're wondering a bit what you've got off the Christmas-tree. My Mumsie's Hetty Allen. You know the name, perhaps?' Catherine was sorry – she did not. Emmy was unoffended. 'Well, if you're not much interested in the stage, I suppose you wouldn't. Of course it's more than twenty years ago, really, that she made her name, in vaudeville. She was one of the Baker troupe of dancers to begin with, yes, performed on the continent, Paris and everywhere. Then she starred and made a real hit in one of the Ted Brown shows. Quick-fire musicals, if you remember. But of course she's getting on now – she's lost her lovely figure – she was a swell dancer in her day. She still does a bit of stuff on the air – and there's a packet to be made that way if you catch on, but it never did give her proper scope. And now her looks have gone.'

On this Catherine was able to say, 'But I haven't a wireless, as you see.'

'Yes, I noticed that,' Emmy rejoined in a voice of astonishment. 'That's why I wondered whether you were a Plymouth Brother – or would it be Sister? No? Well, I must say I'm

glad. . . I've had people tell me I might make a thing of the stage, and of course I can dance and sing, and antic a bit, too – but, no, not on your life! I never had the least hankering after the boards myself – I've seen too much how things go, my dear, unless you're tops. Of course I had to go on time and again when I was little – fairies and so forth. And I once played Ibsen, too,' – here Emmy's big, mobile mouth suddenly became a clown's mouth, an effect which Catherine inclined to think would have been popular with the gallery-boys, although she could but judge by her own feelings. 'In my youth, that was. In fact, I was carried on – the little bonnet in *A Doll's House* – just plain little Emmy. My one and only lapse into the legitimate. And my brother the Rip was one of the little boys in the piece –'

'The Rip?' Catherine thought she had not heard aright.

'Oh, why, yes, his friends sometimes call him that. Rippy. Don't know why. Not what you'd think, though. Rest-in-peace, perhaps. Quick on the draw, perhaps.'

Although not taking quite all this in, Catherine was startled; it occurred to her that this crudely satirical nickname, at the same time childish and sinister, had a flavour of the criminal world.

But Emmy had made eyes to show she was only being funny, a certain disrelish for dry fact was already to be suspected, and she went on talking perhaps even more trippingly. 'Should have said "Ferdinand". . . Yes, I've got three brothers, two of them just kids and the other older than myself. But Ferdy's a problem, that's God's truth. He's always been a headache to poor Mumsie.' Here Ferdy was switched off, with some abruptness. 'Well, I never rose to Ibsen again – somehow they've done without me. That was the highlight of my stage career.

'However, I suppose this is all a kind of surprise to you?

Ah, I can see it is. I do hope you don't feel I'm a bit behind-hand with mentioning I'm theatre in a manner of speaking? But you see I thought to myself that you might be chapel, living in a place like this, and chapel people are sometimes pretty hot against stage folk. Bless them! I don't know why. You're not? That's fine! I reckon it's providential. Because had you been, and passed me up for that reason, I'd have been in a jam.

'Here's how it is. Mumsie's got a new friend, and he's resident. She doesn't mind the two kids, but I'm a spare, naturally. And Ferdy, too. So Ferdy and I have got to pack up. Oddly enough, it looks as if the old lad's quite a bit feathered – a miracle, I grant you, if it's really so. But if she's afraid of me making the running, well, I ask you, what wouldn't I give to have her get off! But she can't seem to see it. She needn't have shrieked at me like that, though,' Emmy added reminiscently, in a tone of slight grievance. 'Nor bashed me with the bottle – or such was her intention – but it smashed up on the mantelpiece instead of my nob. Lucky, wasn't it? But, there, I don't know whether she meant it. Oh, she can't help it, you know, it's just that she's got that kind of nature. Dynamic.

'Still, she does put upon me, and always has done. In fact, that goes for the lot of them. An artist isn't at his best in such circumstances, it doesn't make for good work. So I thought, "Well, I'm in the money at the moment, why not give myself a break? I'll just walk out on them all" – take the chance, you know, while Mumsie's cashing in on her fellow. And at that very second, if you'll believe me, my eye fell plonk on your ad. "That's good enough," I thought. "Here's my cue and good luck to me!" I knew I'd have to go right off into the blue, you see, and find some rustic scene that would be a real hide-out, or they'd all be piling in on top

of me – Ferdy especially. Of course I shall send Mumsie a wire as soon as I'm settled. I don't want her to be wondering whether I'm murdered – she might worry.'

It was in a bemused state that Catherine had listened, and went on listening to many more details in the same style; an exotic world opening before her. She listened quite passively, in physical ease, too, leaning back. Her mood was one of deliberate acceptance of a solace, a comforter, as treacherous as drink. More than once she found herself laughing. She seemed to be witnessing one of those express-speed, coruscating spectacles of the theatre which fascinate an audience into disregarding crudity and degradation of content; she was aware that such was the effect upon her of Emmy's sensational narrative, so vigorous in itself and retailed with such vivacity of voice and gesture – and also, it occurred to the listener, with a kind of heathen innocence. Crudity, and worse, there was. These were low standards. She saw that perfectly.

But strange things had happened to her in the course of the past hour.

When Emmy's narrative came to a pause, when she began to hint questions and look interrogatively, invitingly, to look, in short, quite obviously for a return of information, Catherine suddenly told her that a few months after they had come to the cottage her sister had been taken away, very ill. So far her tongue carried it. But then her heart turned in revulsion, and instead of going on to tell the rest she began relating to this strangest of confidantes, in a flood of passionate, distressful words, the story of the cottage and Hungerford's part in it; exaggerating this part all unwittingly, getting the proportions wrong, unconsciously garbling the tale, because she could not go on to say what had happened to Clem. Voice and manner did not belong to what she was

saying; the undertones of an intense despair sounded far too intense for such a tale, one merely of money loss and a little shabby trick which had wrought material damage. But she did not know it. Nor did she see that the eyes gazing into her own were full of intelligence, sharpening to a watchful curiosity.

Nevertheless, Miss Rivers did not forget to be a talented listener. She entered into her part with zest and artistry. She drew up her chair, gazed earnestly into Catherine's eyes, her expression changing to suit the various phases of the tale and always reflecting the speaker's emotions many times intensified. She gave back indignation which grew generously as the narrative proceeded. She questioned tirelessly, received answers with an air of startled horror which seemed to say that the story abounded in matters almost too shocking to be believed. At times she even clasped her cheeks in her two hands, fingers spread, elbows raised, rather as if about to shriek.

But the poor raving one, if she noticed the quality of the performance, was too far gone to care. Nothing with the faintest aspect of sympathy was too crude to catch this weak heart suddenly flayed of all protection and left helpless for ever. She appealed to the girl as if to a friend, anxiously inviting her opinions; she was like a person who has spent all his resources and asks humbly for help of the first comer in the street.

Emmy forcibly did not think that a man so experienced could have made an honest mistake. Her enlarged tragedy-eyes said here was wickedness she had never dreamed of. But when posed with the riddle, 'But what reason can he have had, do you think? We felt it was incomprehensible,' the young woman opened her eyes in real astonishment, dropped all her stage effects and exclaimed quite simply,

'Why, my dear, of course – a good rake-off! What else.'

This, however, brought Catherine to a halt, and even called up a smile. 'A man of his means and reputation? No, it would never have been worth while to him.'

But Emmy shook her head darkly. What would people not do for cash? Her colour rose, her eyes sparkled with excited wrath. She grew voluble, and the name of Hungerford was pronounced in a rising key of scorn and disgust. 'That Hungerford!' it became at last, with suitable adjectives and dramatic brandishings of the fists.

In fact, Emmy was enjoying herself in the novel position of meting out moral judgment.

That night, Catherine, instead of lying awake for hours, excited, exhausted, or in fevered vision making her dark journeys to the hospital, fell at once into a profound sleep.

AFTER that, it was something of a surprise to find the guest in funds, and to find that her art was a paying reality. That this art consisted mainly of the manufacture of strip cartoons for various publications of the gutter press was a little disillusioning. Moreover, these works were crude and vulgar to an astonishing degree, a fact which at first overwhelmed Catherine. But very well aware of herself as something of a prude by upbringing, she attempted to adjust her ideas, and, seeing that Emmy displayed her achievements with complete frankness, with no thought in the world but that her new friend would approve their competence, acknowledge them for a conscientious piece of work – a good performance cleverly attuned to public taste, which indeed they all too truly were – Catherine had not the heart to do anything but praise her ability. This attitude went well enough. Oh, no, Emmy had not expected Catherine to find her output funny. For she did not find it so herself. She shrugged. Indeed, she was no natural pornographer; she had trouble with her 'ideas', as she confessed. She was a hard-headed business-woman by instinct. 'Myself, I'd just as soon keep it clean. But what people like is dirt, so there you are. An artist just

has to do the best he can with it.' So the artistic conscience worked itself out in Emmy.

But to see with what celerity she drew, at what a pace and with what sureness the little black and white drawings came rattling forth, was fascinating in itself; and to consider under what impossible conditions she had always been obliged to work, to consider the fact that no one had ever taught her anything, was to feel admiration and a pained regret for something excellent wasted. Catherine felt quite saddened, it seemed to her horrible to see that sparkling, powerful line-work, which wonderfully flowed from Emmy's little fingers, put to such unspeakably base use. Emmy was a clever young woman, so much was plain; she was perhaps even better than that, she was intelligent, she had brains. But Catherine thought the girl was unaware of the extent to which her talent was abused – or was she merely unregretful?

'Fortunately I've got several friends who feed me ideas,' she confided. 'It's the ideas that don't come easy. If ever you get any ideas of the kind, you'll pass them on, won't you, dear?' Catherine gravely promised.

'But I can see you're a bit shocked,' the girl added quickly, with her head tipped to one side. 'In fact, I can't see, myself, what people get out of it.'

'Not shocked. But you're really very clever – look at that little serious sketch you have there! That's a lovely line! It does seem a shame that such real talent shouldn't be better employed.' Emmy appeared to gather this in somewhat anxiously, but from some obscure angle which eluded Catherine. She said, in a tone of surprise, she considered the pay quite good, taking into account the little she put into it. However, she would drop it any minute if she found something which paid better. She'd have to – with Mumsie and all the rest of it. No choice. But she was doing quite well, she

repeated, as if anxious to impress this point on her hostess; she was in the money.

Well, no, perhaps it was vain to attempt the apotheosis of Emmy as a wasted genius.

Meanwhile, it was plain to Catherine, and it was somewhat mystifying, that her young guest quite seriously desired to keep in her good graces.

It suited Emmy, for the present, to be where she was. She had fled from something other than her wild, sponging family, Mumsie's old lad and Mumsie's tantrums – these were but subsidiaries. She wished to keep out of reach of Ferdy for some little while.

And now, on top of that, she was interested. She had immense natural zest and that intense, ferreting, all-round curiosity which shows keen intelligence of a kind. She was amused. She had a youthful pleasure in novelty and a picturesque situation. The thing had caught her fancy. A wonderful little outfit! She dramatized everything. She was thrilled. She loved it! So weird, so crazy-gang! She was not in the least put off by the discomforts of the cottage in severe weather, as Catherine had feared she would be. Emmy was tough. She was old in such comfortless ways of living as Catherine had never known, and to her mind domestic hardships and disasters merely provided matter for the sardonic joke.

Besides, she was beginning thoroughly to enjoy herself in the role of champion and castigator, in being on the side of righteousness and taking a high moral tone about the villainy of certain people; and nothing gave her greater satisfaction than further evidences of weakness in the cottage, when she would cry, with a meaning wag of the head, 'And whose fault is it?'

But it was all really enjoyment, an exciting game, even

the genuine indignation. There were so many things at which she 'couldn't help laughing'; she would never be able to regard Old Flytton's cottage in itself with becoming gravity. But then Emmy did not know what had happened there.

She still did not know. Or at least Catherine had not told her.

Weekly, without a word of explanation, unobtrusively as possible, Catherine continued to make her preparations for the visit to the hospital, concealing these as well as she could, went and returned and kept her own counsel, kept her lips tight shut on all the trouble and on the dreadful imbroglio and frightening confusion which the small business affairs now harrying her appeared to her. And yet here Emmy's practical wits, though uninstructed, could probably have given her sensible assistance, and were ready to do so - Catherine suspected it but could not admit it.

For could all this go on under Emmy's keen eyes without her understanding? Catherine hardly knew or cared, as long as she had not to speak.

It was already spring; yet the sky darkened, the ponds lay like a plate of dark steel, and powdery snow was shaken softly through the air and gathered at the rim of the water like a curl of frozen foam. The metallic clatter of the black-birds sounded over the frosty gardens and the coarser and deeper note of the magpies, as the birds pecked at the few abandoned apples in the topmost boughs, down the shrivelled and greasy cheeks of which the rain had dripped all through the winter.

Emmy was greatly fascinated by the destructive drama of the bonfire; she delighted in what she called 'tidying up', which largely meant committing to the flames anything excitingly inflammable, while dumping the rest in some obscure corner. So they spent much time in the open air, chopping and clipping. When the weather at last grew milder, they attempted to dig, and finally even succeeded in clearing again a small patch of ground where Emmy proposed to sow grass-seed later. Emmy would make a lawn. Her notion of gardening was uninstructed but vigorous. The young woman's brown sticks of arms had a sinewy vitality, and her spirit the same. And all these labours were helped along by a merry

humour. She cut down and raked up masses of winter wreckage and gathered the stuff into a great cock beside which she posed, rake in hand, wearing a plastic raincoat and bonnet, the whole effect seeming to her so funny that a dark and foggy snapshot was taken, to which she added the March date and the caption 'Hay-making at Flytton Hall', and sent it to her London friends. 'I've told them I'm staying with a lady, a big land-owner. Only Greg's got my address.' She questioned Catherine about her neighbour across the stream - she wished Catherine had been more enterprising and got something out of the man in the way of advice or information. For Emmy was continually wondering if something could not be made out of it all. She felt in her Jewy bones that a thing so unusual could be made to fetch a fancy price, should have a high, arbitrary value, could one but bring it into the right market. 'Would you mind if I spoke to him, supposing I saw him!' 'Dear, no, I don't mind. Do as you please. Though I didn't much like the man -' 'Well, I don't know - it seems such a waste, all this gray-ound!' For Emmy did not avoid the neighbours, whom she loved to mimic. Neither was she on mere nodding terms with them. She cheeked the old people and had soon achieved popularity of a sort with the cottagers; a relationship which was, however, deeply coloured with satire on both sides.

Long draughts of the fresh air, many hours in the open, and Emmy's little face, more marked than it should have been, at her age, with tense hard work or strenuous living or dubious experience, began to show, rather touchingly to Catherine's mind, that it had not after all lost all kinship with the softly rounded, healthily glowing face of childhood.

So the weeks passed and were packed with sensation, because everything round Emmy was packed with sensation,

which she herself created where it was lacking. Dull? No, indeed, it was not that, Emmy might well protest.

One cold afternoon, they had been working and had stayed late at the end of the garden, attempting to deliver sundry ancient trees from the murderous clasp of the ivy, and so busy were they and full of talk and warm with their exertions that they went on till Catherine exclaimed suddenly, 'But we must go in, Emmy, look how dark it's getting.'

Then they picked up their tools and began to push ruminatively through the mat of rushes to the higher ground, now stopping to call each other's attention to some natural curiosity, now to count the chimes of the church clock, to listen to cries from the hills, made aerial by the distance, or to peer after something imagined to be flitting through the bushes. One would stop and the other turn and wait. It was all calm, leisurely. Catherine stood leaning on her tool, while Emmy poked about in one of the ditches and was the next moment holding up on the end of a fork some grotesque bit of rubbish, some fragment of boot or clothing, which she was examining with busy, satiric interest, saying, 'What have we here? Human remains? God knows what will turn up in this spot when the last trump goes.'

Catherine laughed.

She heard her own laugh, or became conscious of it after it was uttered. And that she could laugh, in this place -

Thus suddenly the comparison forced itself on her, the difference between her state of only a few weeks ago and this sense of amusement, mild but real; and without turning her eyes on Emmy she examined her image searchingly, and for a moment allowed herself to think, in the terms of light, what a quaint guise the guardian angel had taken, the one sent to save. For she dimly conceived how it might be that she owed Emmy her sanity. She smiled to herself; stood

there smiling, curiously affected, between amusement and emotion.

Yet to laugh, in that place, was it as good as it seemed?

She raised her eyes. The sky was fiery, the woods blue and dark. A bonfire with clear, red flames was burning in a near-by garden. Large sparks, glowing morsels, whirled off the tips of the flames, which stretched upright. They had glimpses of the cottage in the light of the sunset.

'Look at our little hay-oose!' cried Emmy gaily, mocking the local pronunciation, as she loved to do. 'I see you, little old red-face!' She was holding aside some twigs and peering up the garden. Catherine for a few moments turned to stare at the sky and then, suddenly aware that Emmy had fallen silent, glanced round to see what she was doing. The girl was still standing peeping through the boughs. Catherine approached.

'What is it, Emmy?' She fancied she had made the girl start. 'Nothing,' Emmy answered, 'I'm only looking;' then in a voice of exaggerated rapture, soft and rather breathless, she exclaimed, 'Isn't it romantic! Isn't it lovely!' Catherine agreed, though wondering a little.

'It ought to be haunted, you know, this place.'

'Why do you say that?' Catherine asked slowly.

'Oh, well – so old, and all. Think what's happened here – in olden times.' But Emmy now had rather the air of looking round for a diversion. 'Hark at those owls!'

'Is it an owl? No – some creature on the lake.'

Then they went up through the dusky garden silently, Emmy lagging behind.

But the first casual idea that the girl had seen someone up there on the right of way was abruptly ousted by another of terrible intensity.

'She knows. Of course she has heard it all. And how does

she think of her. *Mad and wild*. And perhaps having caught a glimpse of someone up there – Oh, but could it be?' Suddenly all disordered, she went ahead almost at a run, gasping beneath her breath the words 'Wait, wait – I'm coming.' Oh, yes, such pitiful bids for freedom *were* sometimes made! It was not utterly impossible!

But the frantic thought could not but collapse almost in its forming. She knew too well that kind of fever-dream, full of horror, full of longing, often enough suffered by those who had a loved one in that type of durance.

CATHERINE opened the door and uttered an exclamation, and heard Emmy, coming up behind her, say quickly, 'Oh, lord, what is it?'

'A letter? At this hour? Through the post, too?' They decided that it must have gone astray and been held up at some neighbour's since the morning. She picked it up with a qualm of misgiving and stood holding it to the light, hating its irruption, wishing it had never come; and saw that it was from Margaret Forrester.

Yes, a long letter, at last an answer to her own; and it would be kind, no doubt, although she was undeserving, with her unfriendliness in the past. She could count on its being kind in spite of its tardy appearance as an answer. Margaret was not one to wait for an apology before granting forgiveness. But she felt a dread of opening it, experiencing not only the usual apprehension which made every letter in her hands tremble, but a moment of panic lest her angry enigma should have been deciphered. Thinking hurriedly, she was hardly able to recall what she had written, but she remembered all too well her wild state of mind. The contrast between that extreme state and her present one was brought back to her

now, and more sharply than while she was in the garden, and was now utterly despoiled of its hint of salvation, which stood revealed as nothing but a fair mask cunningly arranged on an evil countenance. Her present calm glared forth as outrageous. She was shamed and sickened.

But she forced this impression away from her – she would not be made to return to that raving woe, even though it now showed as the only adequate response, the only true one.

'How are you? How are you *both*?' Margaret began. 'I was saddened when I opened your letter and found still no good news. You know that my heart aches for Clem – I would rush to see her any day if you thought it fitting. But you tell me she doesn't want to see me, and I saw myself that my few visits did her no good –'

'Stop, stop! Silence! Oh, the cruelty!' Catherine thought indignantly, with hands trembling so much that she had to turn from Emmy. Suddenly, all deranged, she realized how little saved she was. And she ran flinching eyes over a few more lines to find something more endurable.

She was arrested by the words 'Still, you do sound a little more cheerful, more interested in things –' What perverse, undreamed-of effects a letter can produce! And mercifully diverted by the gentle, unconscious irony of this, she started again a few lines lower, with growing calm.

'But, first, what must you think of me, my dear Cathy, for having sent you no answer all this while? Well, it's all due simply to some idiotic, unlucky oversight on the part of the old woman who has been keeping the house aired and dusted for us – somehow your letter was caught up with some circulars and put aside instead of being forwarded – only a wonder that it was not destroyed. But I should have begun by explaining that I've been staying at Mentone with poor Prudence, my cousin, who had a severe operation in the

winter, while Henry has been putting up with his brother in London. And so our house was shut up. We are now back, for good, I hope, although Prudence is still so far from fit that I'm quite taken up with her.

'But really I feel much concerned about you, for yesterday Henry came out with a piece of information which troubled me. As you may remember, I did once venture to enquire how you were placed for means, but supposed all was well, since you gave me no answer. But yesterday Henry revived the question, having heard something of the legal management of such a situation as yours, and suggested that you might be in a bad position financially. Now, *is* that the case? Do, do be frank and tell us if it is, and let us see if we can put our heads together and find some solution.

'Meanwhile, your little enquiry about Martin Hungerford has resulted in giving me an idea which may be of some temporary assistance – But, really, dear Cathy, you are much too scrupulous! Yes, really, almost funnily so! Martin himself, I feel sure, must quite have forgotten his trifling service to you. However, if you really wish to repay any little debt you feel you owe him, here's my plan – one which would do the Hungerfords a kindness and also – more to the point – one by which *you* would benefit.

'Now, it so happens that the Hungerfords are, just for the moment, in a small quandary.

'I think I've often given you to understand that things have never been quite the same between Martin and ourselves since his second marriage? Not that we don't like Olive well enough, only of course it was dear Jessica who was our great friend, and Olive is so very much younger than ourselves, just a girl. And, besides, at the time we felt it rather badly, poor Jessica having been dead barely a year – Not that I mean to criticize Martin, he was a good deal younger than

Jessica, as perhaps you've heard, and still young when he lost her. I mention all this merely because I'm not sure whether I've ever told you that there is now a small child as well as Jessica's boy. Here at last we come to the crux of the matter!

'The boy, poor little fellow, has become rather difficult of late and is making a little trouble over the baby, as so often happens in such cases. He's jealous, very jealous, perhaps after having had Olive for a short while all to himself. For whether his own mother's death upset him in the first place, although he was so small – But I must get to the point.

'Well, now, Martin, as I believe I told you, is gone to Scotland and will be there possibly for as much as six months on some big commission, and Olive and the baby are to go to her parents shortly. But the boy was to have remained with friends in London while they were gone. So Martin had arranged. But now it turns out that these people are quite unable to have him owing to the sudden illness of the lady who was to have cared for him. This happened, most unexpectedly, after Martin had left. And Olive, as I can see, does not at all wish to have the boy with her at her parents' home, as I suppose Martin may expect her to do in the circumstances.

'Now, how would you like to take the child on? Really he is a dear little fellow – you must not think of him as a problem child, heaven forbid! He's merely a little precocious and sensitive (Martin's own temperament, you know, the artistic) and has probably suffered from a fancy that he's not wanted. I would so willingly have taken him myself, as Olive wished me to do, only that, as I've told you, I have Prudence on my hands at the moment, and she is still quite an invalid, and really I could not have a small boy capering about the place. So then I suggested you.

'We should not need to trouble Martin himself about the arrangement; Olive has heard me speak of you and Clem so often and knows everything about you, and knows that the child could not be in more trustworthy hands. And in a way it would be ideal for him to run in the country for the summer – far better than being left in town, I should say. And Olive agrees. As it happens, their doctor has recommended freedom from lessons for the time being. So everything fits in.

'Well, how does the proposal strike you, I wonder? Wouldn't it be cheerful for you? Companionship? Of course, he's only six, but such a bright, intelligent little fellow. He did stay with me last year for a few weeks, so I speak from experience. I was quite charmed. I envy you! I found him most companionable – though not a child to be sized up at a glance – dreamy, a little unusual – but you would perhaps have time for him. Oh, I do advise you to take him, it would cheer you. And there would be your return to Martin! Martin, I know, is intensely fond of his little boy – so much so, in fact, that I sometimes feel Olive resents it, just a tiny bit.

'The Hungerfords would, according to Olive, make you the most generous return for your trouble.

'Just let me know if it appeals to you – and then Olive will write to you –'

Here a sigh of relief escaped Catherine and she put the letter down, thanking heaven that Emmy was a sufficient excuse. A girl she might have considered; but a boy, no!

At this moment, Emmy looked in from the kitchen and Catherine told her what had been suggested.

Emmy looked at her with a questioning air in which a keen little touch of calculation was perceptible. This expression was gradually exchanged for a very roguish one. She was amazed, she scornfully protested, at the nerve of some people.

Catherine explained. 'Oh, Margaret knows nothing about

it, she thinks the house is all right, we didn't like to tell her. And of course we can only suppose that Olive Hungerford knows nothing, either.' Emmy, taking this in, made big eyes. 'What a situation, isn't it! Oh, it's a good situation, you know – it would play. Gosh, wouldn't it play, though! I mean, it would act.' And she relapsed into an instant's thoughtfulness. 'Well, why don't you take it on? You might as well squeeze what you can get out of *friend Hungerford*, I should have thought. They won't cut it so fine, I dare say, that you can't make a bit on the kid? Won't hurt him to rough it rather more than's expected.'

'Oh, but,' Catherine protested, 'a boy?' And she looked at Emmy in such simple astonishment that the young woman was moved to laughter. 'I should have thought it would be rather fun! But, there – it's *your* home.'

'Well, but, Emmy, I don't understand small boys.' 'Well, it's time you did.' 'I mean, I feel it wouldn't be fair to the child – my not understanding him. One oughtn't to experiment with children, it's dangerous.' 'Lord, a boy isn't a tiger!' cried Emmy, astounded at all this heart-searching about such an ordinary object as a small boy – a creature which, in her experience, was almost self-subsisting.

'Well, but do you understand them? Well, I suppose you do.'

'Heavens, near enough,' Emmy cried feelingly, with a martyred air. 'Haven't I got two young brothers?' But it had already been made plain that Emmy did not think too ill of her little fellows, of whom indeed she often spoke fondly and proudly. 'Leave him to me,' the girl said easily. 'I'll see he's no trouble.'

Catherine was silent, considering, surprised at her own inclination to take the little boy. Of course she would never have thought of it but for Emmy. Suddenly she saw how

felicitous was Emmy's presence in her house. She would have fancied herself to make such a dreary companion for a poor child; whereas Emmy could hardly have been bettered. Surely she could not? Gay, good-tempered, young enough to romp with him, and yet, with it all, having both common sense and experience. Catherine felt she would have dreaded the continual company of the child too much, could not have put up with it; but if Emmy took him off her hands to a large extent, as she promised, she herself could see to his material wants, she supposed.

Of course she would keep an eye on them.

Besides the whole situation was merely provisional. A lively, quick scene would open, be played a little for her diversion, and then soon, very soon, she would be alone again.

'I SHALL offer to take the little boy, Emmy, since you don't mind,' Catherine announced the next morning. She had just spread her writing materials on the table in the garden room, and she turned her head to look at Emmy through the half-open door between that room and the kitchen.

The young woman was standing in the centre of the little kitchen, and Catherine caught a sudden kindled, significant look on her face which for a moment she could not read.

'Good, good. Ha!' said Emmy deeply.

There was a full-bodied quality about Emmy's voice. It was a decidedly individual voice, unexpectedly low-pitched and strong, and it made a piquant combination with the girl's general light-weight appearance and sparkling looks. Only, rather too well one could imagine for it a natural development into the rich, coarse contralto of the comedienne.

'You've no objection, Emmy?' she said, a little at a loss.

'No objection at all, dear,' Emmy returned, with a demure pursing of the comical mouth; and then said dreamily, 'Ah, so we've got him now, friend Hungerford!' And she gave as if to herself a wicked roll of the eye. This Catherine viewed through the doorway in some uncertainty.

Suddenly, startlingly, in the throaty and coarsened voice she used for singing, the girl burst into an idiotic ditty of which these words were the chief feature:

'He shall die! He shall die . . . ie! He shall die . . .'

But Catherine stopped her, crying hastily, laughingly, 'Emmy - don't!' She was half ashamed, the next instant, of her tone of protest, for she said to herself that it was a mere nervous folly to derive such a shock and thrill from a little bit of cheerful clowning. Or was its funny savagery actually a shade too realistic? Emmy's anticking had such zest, such vigour; it parodied earnestness too closely. Besides, as Catherine realized, abruptly enlightened, that throaty voice was an intoxicant.

So it was an intoxicant? Well and good.

With a sense of something there better not investigated, a little flustered, saying she must give her mind to her letter, she sat down at the table. She turned with heaviness to the making up of an answer to a kind and sympathetic woman who was one of her own sort, who was one of Clem's sort, who belonged to the old life she could no longer face, the atmosphere of which she could hardly breathe - one between whom and herself the tragedy lay openly in all its horror, not to be avoided. She must write decently to Margaret this time, with the liking and gratitude she really felt, while longing to put, 'Leave me alone, I do beg of you! Why can't you leave me alone?' She answered briefly.

But when she came to the query about Simon, she leaned back and called out to Emmy, 'I'm relying a lot on you, you know. I'm not, I believe, a very fit person to have charge of a child.'

'Why? Don't you like kids?' Emmy sang back jollily from the sink, where she was splashing away at a bit of washing.

Catherine smiled, as if at a thought of her own, and then confessed, 'Well, I'm afraid of them. When I hear a child's voice raised a bit riotously, I feel vilely frightened.'

'Oh, those little devils up on the road have got on your nerves, that's all it is. Don't let it throw you.'

Emmy took a towel and came to sit on the edge of the table while drying her hands, and on Catherine's saying that, should the child come, it looked as if she would have to make up a bed every night in the middle room, 'Lord,' Emmy cried, surprised, 'can't he have a shake-down with me, that baby?' So it was arranged. Then Catherine went on to foresee the many alterations in their ways which would be necessary; Emmy carelessly agreeing to everything, while being lively and full of sly allusions to certain persons in one's power.

Catherine ended by laughing.

Did she, then, not see what this young woman was? She saw very clearly. A young woman of much levity of disposition and of no principles. A young woman often exceedingly lax and coarse even in her talk - only it all went with such good humour, such amiability and obligingness. A young woman whose feelings were vitiated by the false theatre-spirit, whose manners and very looks were spoiled by the affectations of the stage, and had that meaningless over-emphasis which the everlasting aping of emotion brings. Whatever came of such falsities of manner and feeling, it could hardly be a love of truth.

Sometimes, when attending to the girl's room, she would come upon some indication of a squalid taste and vulgarity of spirit, some tell-tale sign left carelessly exposed perhaps simply in ignorance of its offence. Repugnant to Catherine all such details invariably were; and then indeed she would pause and stand considering in deep astonishment what it could be which made this young woman not only tolerable to her but

so supremely seductive that she trembled at the thought of losing her.

But only at scattered moments did she still try to account for the pleasure she took in the girl's company. She was keenly diverted by those stories of stage and near-underworld which Emmy could tell her; and she felt no concern because it was plainly a stage of those lowest levels where all kinds of shoddy bohemianism ran together, as into a sink, where a riff-raff of actor and artist and journalist seemed to merge into a cheerful, ugly, mongrel crowd the fixed characteristic of which was lawlessness. For it skirted the criminal world and mingled with it here and there. Not that Emmy's stories gave any distinct views of this – though indeed they often had the air of being edited for the hearer's benefit. But it was a world of disorder, that was clear; sharply amusing, highly various, light of heart and conscience, and, generally, of a large, sprawling good-nature which, having some cheap semblance of a heart in it, sweetened the mixture.

But it was not, of course, that shallow admiration a young person might have felt for the slick, underworld type which affected her; it was an obscure feeling of being in the same plight as those who made war on authority.

It seemed hardly fair to consider Emmy quite of this crowd, Catherine told herself in her more sober moments. It was not as if she was like the lighter young women of the stage with their matter-of-fact mingling of two professions, or she had not yet become so. She was a worker, in the real sense of the word, and a grim hard worker when facts compelled her to be; and facts usually did. She lived, as far as Catherine could tell, entirely by her own efforts. Not only that. She assisted or kept others, by her own account. And to her disreputable family, in spite of much loud and decisive criticism of its various members, it was plain that she was fanatically loyal.

Nevertheless a girl who was the product of a life of disorders and everyday intemperance not even to be imagined by those of Catherine's world, of the Hungerfords' world. A creature light and worthless as a straw, who had been carried inconsequently to that 'bad spot' – had been carried there, sucked there, like a morsel of street refuse into a gutter.

But Catherine, though perceiving all this, did not now admit it to her counsels – *did not care if it was so*.

For good or ill, here was the companion she proposed for the little cherished Simon.

THE little boy descending from the taxi hung his head and leaned it slightly to one side; obviously, he was not a happy child at that moment. Catherine was unreasonably surprised at his appearance. He was largely built and rather dark-complexioned, and she had expected him to be fair and girlish. The worried-looking young woman, getting out after him, did not immediately see Catherine, who therefore had leisure to observe them both. She stood at a little distance while Olive Hungerford dealt with the taxi-man. The young woman was wearing a white pirate-cap, which made her look very youthful, and had a ribbon in her button-hole, as had been arranged between them, since she and Catherine had never met; while Catherine had just decked herself with its counterpart.

Catherine had been over-anxious, and it was solely her own fault that she had had almost an hour's wait for the taxi at Waterloo, where she had been asked to take over her little charge. Such vigils are sobering.

Olive came towards her, smiling, with her hand on the child's shoulder, trying to disguise the fact that she was having to push him forward. Simon's lower lip was well thrust out.

'He will try to be a good boy with you, I am sure,' she said,

but somewhat plaintively, without conviction, while she straightened his beret and dusted the front of his coat with an unexpectedly capable-looking hand. Then Catherine thought she distinguished a curious expression passing over the young woman's face as she gazed down at him, a look of repulsion, faint but unmistakable. 'I'm afraid there's this little case - his luggage has arrived, I suppose? Simon can quite well carry the case himself.' She spoke with nervous severity. She seemed hardly to know what to say, but in a private voice, with the child standing apart, hurriedly gave Catherine a little information about his constitution and requirements. Most of this had already been gone over carefully between them by letter. Catherine thought her a nice-looking girl, mildly appealing, and felt sorry for her in some unformulated way. There was nothing at all metallic about her, as one had half expected; her air was pure and thoughtful, and one could not feel as if any troublesomeness in the child could be her fault.

Mrs Hungerford kissed the little boy and shook hands again with Catherine, and then, as if feeling much relieved, began smiling more naturally and looked kindly at the other woman; and appearing to want to add something sympathetic and yet not to touch on tragedy too long past, she exclaimed, 'My husband told me about your little cottage, and how very pleased you were with it! I'm so glad you at least have *that* comfort. . . . But I must apologize for having brought you all this way. I'd have brought him right over myself and not troubled you - only I can't leave Baby too long!' Then, as she spoke of her baby, her pretty, shallow eyes filled with a look of restless, irrepressible happiness.

Her mission was accomplished, and she seemed to have cast off a load. Her delight was not to be hidden. She seemed to have a bird-like tendency to spread her wings and be gone; and Catherine, speaking a few final words, concluding the meet-

ing, had a sense of releasing her. The young woman went off with a joyous rush, and did not even look round to smile or wave to them.

Catherine, a timid and incompetent traveller, then had too much to do in selecting the right platform in something of a hurry to take much notice of the child or to do more than give him a few words of direction. Relieved to find herself at last seated in the right train, she said quite gaily, with a spontaneity she could not usually compass with strangers, 'Well, Simon, I do hope you'll enjoy staying with us. We're ever so pleased to have you, you know.' Simon swung his feet and kept his eyes upon them. Catherine supposed he was shy, too shy to speak. At that, her own shyness gripped her fast; she thought humbly she knew what was wrong – her own appearance.

'I have a pretty friend staying with me called Emmy – you'll like her, she's fun. She'll make you laugh.' Still he said nothing. Looking apprehensively at the child's face, she fancied that it was self-possessed, hostile. No, he was not shy. He had simply made up his mind that he would not talk to her. He could hardly keep that up for long, she imagined, but for the moment he was in proud possession of himself. He pulled out a coloured picture-sheet, unfolded it and studied it with intent air, in imitation of a man with his daily paper. All the same, she thought that those unusually wide-apart eyes, not very large but bright as dark glass, had given her one or two glances which were entirely conscious. He was very well aware of her, she believed, and aware, possibly, of the effect he was making. But his expression did not change at all, it was fixed as an animal's.

The little boy had red, frizzy hair, cut very short. (And Catherine recalled in some surprise her instruction that it was to be kept thus. It was 'rather unmanageable hair', it

easily looked untidy.) He had neither the florid nor the milky complexion of the red-haired, however; he was sallow. His soft, thick, flexible mouth, which had not yet any set expression, had a slight natural pout. Altogether, without being pretty or handsome, he was a striking little person. He turned to the window and leaned both elbows on the arm. Then she, from the opposite corner, was astonished and disturbed to see that the frizzy hair, somewhat flattened yet aquiline nose and pouting mouth were all suggestive of the most aristocratic of the negroid profiles.

So, to test how much part her imagination had in it, she kept her eyes turned on the flying view for some minutes, and on looking again thought that perhaps it was not so remarkable as it had first appeared. Now it was the set, apathetic expression of her little charge which engaged her worried attention; and she tried to put herself in the place of this fine-grained little creature, and to imagine that those powerless hands belonged to herself, and that, all helpless and tender, she was being sent away against her will, with perhaps some dark and mystified sense of injustice burning in her heart.

But something went wrong. She found herself looking at him curiously, with an unwilling interest, almost hostile, certainly without sympathy. She could not help feeling that he was a disagreeable child. Still, she racked her brains for something reassuring to say; till remembering how certain occasions of her youth, anticipated with delight, had been ruined for her by the presence of a strange, informative grown-up, when all her desire had been to look and dream, she gave up thankfully.

She opened her book and between reading and gazing out of the window, and an occasional word to her companion, the greater part of the hour and a half's journey was accom-

plished. She simply made her remarks into the air in a calm tone, never giving them the form of questions, without appearing to notice there was no response. But each time her heart throbbed in its discomfiture, pressed by an obscure feeling. 'Very well – what do I care?' – it was near to that.

The journey was, in any case, a bitter one to her because it held memories of the joyful and excited feelings with which she and Clem had first made it.

At last there came into view the silver spire and the elms clotted with nests, standing against the declining light. As they left the station, she walked slowly, carrying the case herself because she feared it was too heavy for him, and pointed out to the child various details of the scene which she thought might have interest in his eyes. The little boy went along scraping his feet sullenly. 'It isn't much further,' she said, to encourage him. He did not answer and had not once smiled. In the faintly rufous light, some of the trees still had a reddish tinge, showing buds or catkins, but many had already broken into lacy leafage.

Emmy flung open the door, and at once, making a wrathful face, seized the case out of Catherine's hand. 'Hanging you all over with the kid's luggage! Just what I should have expected of you know whom!' She inquired how things had gone. But Emmy herself had a tale to tell.

'Well, I've been getting friendly with a neighbour of yours this afternoon – can't call her a friend of yours – but I don't quite know what to make of the end of the story. Yes, I've quite a lot to tell you – but get your things off first. You must have had a hell of a wait at Waterloo – there, didn't I say so? Well, what's *she* like, for the love of heaven? Oh, yes, all right, then – tell me later. (Hullo, Buddy!) So you did get the fast train down – the one I came on, wasn't it? Lord, don't I remember getting all neurotic and thinking, "Suppose she's a

dragon?" Fall to, then, chaps – tea's all ready – a lovely tea!' Emmy rolled her eyes, somewhat absently, at the little boy. But a child was no novelty, she seemed a little preoccupied, she was full of her afternoon's adventure, which, she asserted, had ended with 'a bit of a mystery. Yes, well – as soon as you've got your things off. "Hullo, Grumpy," I said. You been told not to answer back? Well, isn't that a treat? Come on, smile,' she whispered, pinching the small face. Then, struck at last by that lack of response which had already caught Catherine's worried attention, she pushed him into the bathroom and when the door was shut pronounced him a lively kid.

Catherine felt half amused, still half dismayed. She drew Emmy down to the kitchen and there gravely recounted his odd behaviour. Emmy laughed. 'Oh, he won't keep that up,' she said.

'Isn't it queer that he should have kept it up all the way down in the train? Of course I have no knack with him.'

Emmy was clearly astonished that anyone should take a small boy's fit of the sulks seriously.

'Well, I dare say he is a nasty little piece of work – what can you expect? He's got a funny little mug, by the way! Does he remind you of his dear pop at all?'

'Oh, no – Mr Hungerford's fair. Or perhaps I should say sandy, a light auburn.'

'I see. Foxy.'

Catherine laughed at her.

'I wonder you can bear the sight of the kid – I wonder you don't hate him.'

'Oh, no! Good gracious, what an idea!' But she felt at once that she had taken too serious a tone.

Here Emmy began to sing, in a hoarse, dramatic whisper,

with the same funny intensity as before, 'He shall die . . . he shall die!' Catherine checked her quite sharply, calling back from the stairs where she had gone to hang her coat. Then she felt a stroke of alarm lest she should have given offence by her unreasonable squeamishness, and, returning, she began warmly praising Emmy's tea-table. 'What a wonderful tea, Emmy! How lovely it is to find it all ready when one comes in!' And she looked at the girl with feelings of gratitude excessive for this trifling occasion, as she realized. All the same, Emmy's domestic style secretly amused her, for the young woman was addicted to breakfast cups at all hours and inclined to put jam-pots and saucepans on the table. Emmy thought she considered the song vulgar and cheerfully promised to sing it no more. Meanwhile, she hastened to turn up the gas under the kettle.

'I did wish you were with me,' she began.

But at this point lagging feet were heard in the room above.

'Where am I to be?' called Simon, in an angry, demanding voice.

Emmy held up her finger and took upon herself to negotiate from the foot of the stairs. 'You can "be" where you like – up there or down here. We don't care. But we've got a nice tea, down here. But do as you please – Simple Simon.'

'My name isn't that at all – it's Simon Hungerford,' they heard the child say. Now his voice sounded proud but tearful.

'Ah, be your age. Come and have tea, if you like.'

'No, I shall sit here.' 'Very well, do as you please. More for us!' 'Is there toast?' 'Can be, if you want it.' 'Jam?' 'Yes.' 'Cake – with sugar on it?' 'It's your cake. It says so.' 'How?' 'Come and see.' Then they heard, in a very weakened tone, 'No, I shall sit here.' 'Very well. I'm glad. More for us.'

'What is he doing?' asked Catherine anxiously.

'Squatting at the top of the stairs. Oh, let him stew in his

own juice, that's best. I'll make the tea.' She was impatient to begin her story.

But Catherine exclaimed nervously, 'Oh, no, let's wait a little and see if he will come down. Don't make the tea for a few minutes – do you mind, Emmy? While we're waiting, you can tell me your tale.'

Then Emmy's narrative, embellished in her usual style, was retailed for Catherine so vividly that, relaxing in the warmth of the fireside and the comfort of the girl's presence, she lost temporarily her uneasy sense of her little guest on the stairs.

EMMY began her story seriously, speaking without her usual tendency to quips and patter, and hiding, Catherine judged with surprise, a faint degree of perturbation. Why this was, did not appear. But her style soon took its normal way.

Feeling lonely, as she said, after Catherine had gone, she had decided on a walk; a walk with an object. She had intended to reconnoitre the house opposite, or perhaps its inhabitants were more in her mind, and, in particular, a hope of making contact with the helpful neighbour. She had soon reached the lane on the hillside, the serpentine course of which she had often traced from below, but only to find, just as Catherine had done, that nothing of the house could be seen from the depths of the lane.

However, Emmy had gone on briskly up the hill, in the spring sunshine, in a mood of bounding pleasure, sometimes stopping to listen to the birds – and how well Catherine could picture her little cat, listening to the birds! – standing there in the lane with alert, inquisitive, tiptoe air, with small, neat figure done up in a close-fitting coat of pronounced cut under a short fur cape of doubtful quality, of a type suitable for

evening wear in town; with round, liquid-lighted eyes, so like the eyes of a night-creature, roving in their vivacious manner, intensely busy with the surfaces of things, nothing escaping them. Emmy had seen a snake. Yes, it really was a snake, and she had run like mad, having an idea that snakes could leap. 'Just to think of it! If I'd been Eve, none of it would ever have happened. I wouldn't have stopped to hear what any old serpent had got to say for itself.' The little grass-snake had slithered away into the ditch, far more frightened than Emmy. And Emmy had resorted to a fag to steady her nerves.

Then the young woman had gone on under the great hedgerow trees and over the brow of the hill, in a deep lane which did not allow her much of a view, till on one side the ground began to fall away again, the hedgerow bank came to an end and was replaced by a dilapidated fencing; and here, suddenly, she had found herself looking down, through the swinging boughs of some vast chestnut trees, into a wonderful region, the strangest of wildernesses, into which the afternoon sun shone in strength. The ground fell away very abruptly, and the whole of the declivity was sheeted with a little yellow flower (with celandines, had Emmy known it), a glittering mosaic of the most marvellous intricacy, formed of shining, heart-shaped leaves and golden stars. This jewelled slope plunged down into a strange valley where there were glistening, boggy tracts of black earth, black with a great depth of rotting vegetation, through which various streams of water meandered, as if having escaped from artificial channels. But here, all over the valley bottom, was a wonderful spectacle. All along beside the waterways, in the black mud, grew masses of large golden flowers – Emmy did not know what these were, but she was ravished by their sight.

Moreover, the whole of the valley was dotted with outlandish forms which at once caught her amazed eye. These

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Feeling lonely, as she said, after Catherine had gone, she had decided on a walk; a walk with an object. She had intended to reconnoitre the house opposite, or perhaps its inhabitants were more in her mind, and, in particular, a hope of making contact with the helpful neighbour. She had soon reached the lane on the hillside, the serpentine course of which she had often traced from below, but only to find, just as Catherine had done, that nothing of the house could be seen from the depths of the lane.

However, Emmy had gone on briskly up the hill, in the spring sunshine, in a mood of bounding pleasure, sometimes stopping to listen to the birds – and how well Catherine could picture her little cat, listening to the birds! – standing there in the lane with alert, inquisitive, tiptoe air, with small, neat figure done up in a close-fitting coat of pronounced cut under a short fur cape of doubtful quality, of a type suitable for

evening wear in town; with round, liquid-lighted eyes, so like the eyes of a night-creature, roving in their vivacious manner, intensely busy with the surfaces of things, nothing escaping them. Emmy had seen a snake. Yes, it really was a snake, and she had run like mad, having an idea that snakes could leap. 'Just to think of it! If I'd been Eve, none of it would ever have happened. I wouldn't have stopped to hear what any old serpent had got to say for itself.' The little grass-snake had slithered away into the ditch, far more frightened than Emmy. And Emmy had resorted to a fag to steady her nerves.

Then the young woman had gone on under the great hedgerow trees and over the brow of the hill, in a deep lane which did not allow her much of a view, till on one side the ground began to fall away again, the hedgerow bank came to an end and was replaced by a dilapidated fencing; and here, suddenly, she had found herself looking down, through the swinging boughs of some vast chestnut trees, into a wonderful region, the strangest of wildernesses, into which the afternoon sun shone in strength. The ground fell away very abruptly, and the whole of the declivity was sheeted with a little yellow flower (with celandines, had Emmy known it), a glittering mosaic of the most marvellous intricacy, formed of shining, heart-shaped leaves and golden stars. This jewelled slope plunged down into a strange valley where there were glistening, boggy tracts of black earth, black with a great depth of rotting vegetation, through which various streams of water meandered, as if having escaped from artificial channels. But here, all over the valley bottom, was a wonderful spectacle. All along beside the waterways, in the black mud, grew masses of large golden flowers – Emmy did not know what these were, but she was ravished by their sight.

Moreover, the whole of the valley was dotted with outlandish forms which at once caught her amazed eye. These

curious erections, something like straw beehives, were great plants of pampas grass which, neglected, left to their own devices in cold exile, rose out of the undergrowth with their dried leaves drawn up into this strange form; each plant having, besides, put forth a few fantastically tall, weirdly elongated stalks topped with small heads of greyish plumes. Emmy thought they looked like plumed spears stacked together. The swampy glisten of the black water, the glistening flowers, and this curious presentation of a ghostly kraal, bristling with assegais, all under a warm sun, had suggested a tropical region and a presage of Africa. (Catherine was arrested by this note, so queerly coincident.) Shrubs with long, glossy leaves, at the top of the slope, near the railing, laid their dark, scissor-blade fingers against the sunny hollow. In short, this strange place had obviously been at one time, many years ago, a cultivated water-garden. Even the varnished, roughly carved buds of the chestnuts, extruding furry leaves, had seemed to her, at this unwontedly close view, clumsy, barbaric, like something of primitive workmanship. And meanwhile the birds had all fallen silent, in the afternoon languor, save one with a monotonous cry.

'How lovely - I wish I'd seen it! I must go there,' Catherine exclaimed.

Emmy had squeezed through the fence and climbed down, ruining her light sandal shoes, mad to see the kingcups near to; but she could not reach them over that squelching marsh from which the sun drew up a strong odour of stagnation. 'I wanted to get some plants. "Evidently just the thing," I thought, "for our little ga-a-arden."' She must have been by this time a trifle intoxicated by her adventure, for she had scrambled along in vast enjoyment, with no thought of her clothes. And clothes, with Emmy, were a serious matter. Not that she regarded them with the loving and romantic absorp-

tion of many young women, but she had a very sharp sense of them as things which had cost precious money. So Emmy now referred ruefully to her spoiled shoes and called herself a fool. 'Then my hat got clawed off, like Absalom, on a tree. Where did I think I was going when I set out - Bond Street? I felt good in that hat, it was a cheesy piece.' Yet she had gone on. Perhaps she had responded so enthusiastically to the exotic scene because it had something about it of the theatre spectacle. In fact, she had had the striking idea that this African effect would make a gorgeous set for Robinson Crusoe.

'By that time, having been so long by myself, I began to feel quite weird. Felt as if I'd lost the use of my tongue. And I jumped like old Crusoe himself when I heard someone hailing me.

'Well, anyway, I must say she looked odd, stuck up there, right above me on the opposite slope. Tall, dressed all in black, and, on top of that, she's got a mass of fair hair, almost white, it is, but natural. A natural peroxide, I should call her, not quite the real thing. Besides, she shouted at me.'

'Shouted?'

'Well, you know what the voices of classy folk are like? She called out and told me I was trespassing. "I suppose you're aware you're on private ground?" "I'm just an innocent kid," I said, "after the flowers"; and I cheeked her back a bit and then discovered who she was. The owner. "Well," I said, measuring up the slope with my eye, "count ten before you shoot." "Oh, don't bother, I didn't mean to reprimand you. You're the girl who's staying with Miss Hare, aren't you? From Flytton's cottage." "I am," "but we don't call it that. We call it Flytton Hall." She beckoned me up to her and pointed out where I could get over the stream - so she said. Anything to oblige. I paddled around a bit and then started

to mountaineer, ruining the remains of my outfit. Country's all right but should be better kept. By now I'd judged she was a local bigwig, and I thought if she'd got a real taste for water I might hear something to your advantage, you see, there might be a bit of business doing with the cottage. Hence my exertions. I made it – though, as it turned out, all for nothing. "Well, I think my husband once spoke to Miss Hare about her garden, didn't he?" "Some chap did – offered her sixpence for the cottage. I don't know whether he was your hubby, Reverend Mother" – for behold a crucifix as big as a coat-hanger dangling on her chest. "Yes, that was my husband. The name's Stewart." "A grand old Hebrew name," I said. "But you don't mean to say this ground's yours, too? You've got a funny taste in gray-ound, if I may say so." "Yes, my husband is going to reclaim it and build here. Then of course we shall leave." Off to fresh woods and pastures new – literally!

'So that's what the future holds, my dear. He got that ground dirt-cheap and he's going to slap up a housing estate and make a pile, and then pull out and leave you all to it. That kind of shark.'

Catherine smiled. 'So I understood. But he'll first have to come up against the Council and Housing Authorities?' she suggested, though not hopefully.

'He'll have got *that* all worked out. I as good as said what I thought. She's got a scornful manner. She pointed round and told me to use my eyes. Sure enough, it was the same old thing, no denying it, on getting a close view, a real home from home. Water, water, mud, old saucepans, boots, prams and worse, rotten logs and branches tumbling at all angles, and ivy – all the trees bulging with the stuff and half of them just held up by it. A shambles! "Do you think we bought it from a prosperous owner?"'

Emmy had given such a lively imitation of the woman's voice and gestures that Catherine had received the most vivid impression of her personalty: an imperious type, with a somewhat haughty and intense manner; so vivid an impression that it was disquieting. This imagined portrait became a sort of dark trouble and agitation with Emmy's next words.

'So then she began to ask questions about you. "Oh," I thought, "so that's your line," and I sat down on it. For of course I wasn't going to discuss your affairs, my dear – but I did happen to mention, just to make conversation, that you had gone to town to fetch a small boy who was to stay with us. Now, I'd already noticed something rather funny – that's to say, that she seemed to have a kind of down on you – not what she said so much, but the way she spoke. After I'd told her about Simon, then, she didn't answer for a moment, and I peeped at her, side-view. We were walking then along a path which was less full of obstacles. She was frowning. She's got one of those florid faces which sometimes go with that hair, thin but red, it makes her look angry. Then she snapped out, "Poor child! I pity him!" Naturally I asked why. And then she said you were not the sort of woman who ought to have a child in your charge. Was I indignant! However, I was determined to keep polite and friendly, in case anything came of it. So I humoured her. "One of the children told me she throws stones at them, he showed me a bruise." "What, one of those little innocents who've kicked her front door to matchwood and make a cock-shy of the place every day as they go by? Little liar!" I said. "I'd like to get at his seat. I'd give him bruises!"'

'By this time we'd come up to the house and – better late than never – what did I now find but that we might have gone by the lane instead of taking that short cut that had ripped half my clothes off me – for there we were, with the lane

just below and an exit to hand. However, she'd got me so hypnotized that I went in with her when she asked me. We went into a room straight off the lawn. More religious kick-shaws, like the one on her chest. I didn't much rejoice in being shut up with her, she looks like a woman who'd box your ears for two pins, just to keep things going in the right direction. "Behave yourself, girl!" "Don't answer me like that, girl!" - every minute I expected it. "Never mind," I thought. "If she says any more against my best friend, why, there's a limit and the fur'll fly." So I sang your praises. And what d'you think the woman came out with then? She said, "*I hate her.*" Of course I made pop-eyes. Then she tried to laugh it off. "Don't be absurd, girl - don't you know a joke when you hear it?" Joke! She looked a bit silly, laughed and said, all scornful, "Well, *dislike* her, then."

'Hates me?' Catherine whispered.

Emmy now had a curious air of hedging. 'Well . . . for one thing . . . she's fond of kids, or sets up to be. So then she told me how it was she'd met you and spoken to you.'

But Catherine cried out at that.

'*SHE* knows me? - she has *spoken* to me?' Catherine cried in a tone of horror, and felt that peculiar stiffening of the face which means that one has gone pale.

'So she said,' returned Emmy, looking at her curiously. Then again the girl had an air of hesitating and choosing her words. 'For one thing, she met you, she says, at the school-master's house, the headmaster of the school down in the town - where the little innocents come from. Is he a pal of yours? Never heard you say so. Truth is, I didn't quite get the run of it.'

Catherine let her breath go in a sigh. 'Why, of course,' she replied calmly enough. 'Emmy, you gave me a fright. Well, let me explain. No, he's not a friend, I had never met him till I called at his house, not long before you came. I called to speak about the children, you know. It had got so bad that I really could hardly bear it any more. It was a persecution. So I screwed myself up to it. He was very decent and promised to do what he could, and he did make an impression on them somehow. Of course we don't go on without incidents, do we? But at least it's nothing like it was.'

'More owing to me than him, I should say.' And Emmy

skilfully speared two pieces of bread on a three-pronged toast-fork.

'Well, he was very decent. But I felt quite ill. And perhaps looked it, for he very kindly asked me to stop for a cup of tea. Only, then, to my dismay, I found myself walking into quite a big gathering, nine or ten people. That confused me, I lost my head, and I couldn't tell you two names. The worst of it was that they all started to discuss my business, and with an odd sort of interest, I thought, not really accountable, staring at me and talking across me, rather. Well, perhaps I fancied some of it - I was in such a state.'

But Emmy could hardly be expected to understand what a state it had been. 'We never could understand why those children set upon our house so,' Catherine said in a low, tremulous voice; for in her mind she had gone back to that lowering, suffocating winter and was overwhelmed by a memory of how, at the last, she had not been able to prevent Clem from running out, more than once, greatly agitated, to try to stop the culprits and plead with them.

She went on, abstractedly, with her eyes on the flames, 'But after I was left alone - When I was alone, I ran out once or twice in a dreadful state to try to catch them.'

'What I did myself the other day, and caught him, too, and half murdered him - and so I told Mrs S.,' Emmy said cheerfully. 'But you have to be nippy. And if you don't catch them, it's worse than useless. You didn't? No, that's what I thought - Ur! Why don't they make them with four prongs?'

'Never mind, it isn't much burnt. Well, perhaps I said something pretty violent about the children. But I don't remember. And I don't remember this woman, though I must have spoken to her, I suppose, if she says so. I got away as soon as I could.'

But she could not be unconscious of the quality of Emmy's

listening, extremely intent, and of her eyes, curious and then evasive and kept occupied with the toast; and finally there was a pause.

'Well, yes - it was what you said about the children,' the girl answered at last, and again came out with her little qualifying phrase, 'For one thing.'

'Does she really think I threw a stone at them?' Catherine asked dryly.

'No, of course not. I could see she didn't. But she's unscrupulous, if you know what I mean.'

At this point, the door was pushed open and Simon stood on the threshold, with the back of his wrist pressed to his mouth. Over this, he stared at them, he glared, and Catherine was shocked at the hysteric fury expressed in the twist of the pencilled brows over the dark eyes, which glittered with tears.

'You should have come up!' the little boy said in a voice choked with rage. 'You should have called up again! You should have come up and asked me! You should have asked me! I wanted you to come up and ask me again!'

Catherine trembled in sudden, barely controllable impatience, like a sick person. She was conscious of a fear that she would never be able to stand it, a realization that something within her was too much worn and shaken to bear any more strain, any at all. And what degree of subtlety was required to deal with this? What degree of perception, of intuition, and, above all, of experience - everything which she lacked, as she felt? She was shocked for the child's sake at what she had done in taking him so lightly. But while she hesitated, Emmy, with her mouth full of biscuit, simply reached out, gave a twirl to one of the plates and shoved it across the table towards him. On this plate, Simon's eyes fell and fixed; it held a cheap-looking but very showy sugar cake

on which, with a careless, hasty hand, Emmy had traced out the word 'Simon' in chocolate, and a heart shot through. Catherine was astonished at the simplicity of them both – and, indeed, at her own.

'But, even now,' said Emmy, going on as if nothing had happened, 'you haven't heard the funny part of my adventures – what I call the *funny* part.'

'Oh, Emmy, something else?'

'Yes,' said Emmy, busy arranging toast in the rack. 'But I'll tell you presently, shall I?' And she looked at Simon. The little boy had raised his eyes from the cake and was staring, staring absorbedly, with the tears forgotten on his cheeks, at this new face, pointed, sharp and lovely-eyed, which now lighted brilliantly and bent on him a pretty, roguish smile. 'I did that for you,' she whispered, leaning over him as she went out into the kitchen.

Catherine dried the little boy's tears, without being quite repulsed, and coaxed him to sit up at the table with a plate before him. Simon, retaining his insulted air, at last consented to say what he would like to eat and began to ask questions in an autocratic tone. 'Why has that jug got a handle off it? You shouldn't have broken things on the table.' 'Why do you, when you put something down, go like this?' And he picked up a plate and set it down with absurd, exaggerated care. Then, a little deflated, Catherine remembered how, before Emmy's coming, she had found herself, from constant apprehensiveness, fallen into a habit of moving as silently as possible about the house. At this moment of nervousness, the

habit had revived. She repressed a kind of wounded feeling at the child's derisive tone and began a painstaking explanation. 'Just a bad habit, Simon. I must try to get over it.' Then she broke off and laughed, for Emmy, returning with the teapot, was watching these proceedings with a droll aspect.

Not till the child was in bed and they sat together by the fire again did Emmy add her sequel.

'Well, I got off at last, and of course came home down the lane. Do you know there's one point in that lane, just one, from which you can get a view of your little hay-oose?'

'Yes,' Catherine agreed. 'I saw it myself one day. Doesn't it look rather exciting – quite romantic? I suddenly felt there was no reason – no reason –'

'It looks ever so nice,' said Emmy earnestly. 'Ever so nice.' And she seemed to ponder. 'So you know, then, that you can see the path and everything, all small and very clear. And so there it all was in the afternoon sunshine, which was bright still, although it was getting on. And I stood there for a minute or two, and the smoke went off over the roofs and the washing was blowing on the lines, and the old dog next door here barked and barked, and I could see him racing about at the top of the terrace wall, where their drying-ground is; and then he stopped suddenly. And as I looked, someone came round the corner from the steps and along the path – it was of course all very distant but clear as clear. Yet, this person came up to our back-door, which I could see so plainly, and walked inside!'

'Walked inside? Well, *there* you must have been mistaken! For I suppose you had locked the door?'

But now Emmy looked deeply guilty. 'Why, no, I do hope you'll forgive me. Suddenly, me standing there, my heart jumped into my mouth and I thought, "I don't believe I locked that door." So I didn't wait to see, I hared back.'

'Well, plainly you didn't lock it,' said Catherine, feeling uneasy, but not for obvious reasons. 'But never mind, as far as that goes, it doesn't in the least matter. I often go out without bothering to turn the key. But I should think you were afraid to go in? Surely you were?' She was surprised, indeed, that Emmy had not been so much afraid as to hang about until she herself arrived.

'Oh, I was – fearfully!' Emmy said hastily, with a curious air of telling a fib. 'I thought I should find the whole house robbed and ransacked!'

'Was it a man or a woman?' Catherine then brought herself to ask.

'Oh,' said Emmy, as if, most oddly, that was a point she had hardly considered. 'Why – it was a woman – at least, I think so. Oh, lord, I do hope you'll find nothing gone. I did just look round in a general way.'

'Well, let's see,' Catherine concluded, standing up. She was a little puzzled. So then they looked about, upstairs and down, and finally decided that there was not a thing in the house disturbed or missing. Emmy rather strenuously expressed thankfulness. 'It was one of those gipsies – we get them often – who just opened the door and peeped inside, very likely.' But Catherine could not throw off an uncomfortable impression that there was something which Emmy had not told her.

She turned round from the desk, before which she had been standing in thought idly fingering the contents, and remarked in a tone which had a touch of reproach in spite of herself, 'I believe I should have had to make a bit of an effort to go into the house alone, after seeing *that*, and I'm not physically timid.'

Then Emmy said something which she could hardly credit. 'No, to tell you the truth, I wasn't so frightened – hardly

at all – not at the moment, not till I got into the house and found no one there. Because I thought it must be you!’

‘But how could I have got home so early?’ Catherine exclaimed.

‘Well – something might have happened.’

Catherine considered, and then said, ‘Why were you, then, frightened at all?’

‘Oh, because I wasn’t sure. I thought, “Has she come back ill or something?”’

Catherine did not know what to make of this, whether even to believe it. She put one or two more questions, in growing hesitation; but the girl now had an air almost of embarrassment and would or could add nothing to her story.

When Emmy had gone up to bed, Catherine, after some minutes of inward conflict, softly unfastened the garden door.

HER thoughts that night were painful and sleep-destroying. Whenever she drifted out a little way towards unconsciousness, many bizarre and troubling visions began to stir in the latent confusion of that state; now she saw Mrs Stewart with a fantastic crop of pale hair and a furious expression in her fanatic eyes, now Simon’s faintly barbaric yet aristocratic little profile turned from her in contempt; but, more persistently than the rest, and with peculiar intensity, a diminished, brightly coloured view of the back of the cottage in the afternoon sunshine presented itself to her, with a figure stealing along the path – and that figure – That figure at the door took variable forms, one of them heart-rending.

All hope of sleep had been driven from her. She got up some time in the small hours, crept noiselessly downstairs and then found, very faint, in dust, on the polished tiles by the garden door, the fragmentary print of a man’s heel.

Then she smiled. She smiled at her own folly in supposing, however fleetingly, that Emmy could ever have entertained her own torturing, far-fetched vision; and she smiled ironically to see them both so occupied with their own concerns

and anxieties as each to think the other might be agitated by them. For what did she care if Emmy served to draw upon this house additional evil? She was unspeakably indifferent to it.

Her half-terrible hope was gone, and she locked the door without further thought and returned to her bed.

Thus she had remained, wearily conscious, for many hours, but at last woke to hear the birds sing in a tumult of wind. It was not long after five. Through the roaring gusts, in the half-darkness, a scattering of piping and cawing notes was flung raggedly, the sound bringing images of frail claws gripping the twigs, feathers ruffled to the downy depths, tails turned awry, and the uplifted heads and swelling throats from which poured this music riding on the rough air so triumphantly. But her heart sickened to death. April was near; and her wits almost turned at the thought of Clem still unliberated.

Presently a bubbling song arose from the next room – through which Emmy continued peacefully sleeping, apparently, for it went on unrebuked, uninterrupted. The little boy was singing.

But at breakfast Simon was found to be not yet altogether in a singing frame of mind. He was again dumb, difficult about his food, playing for attention; and future trouble in plenty seemed indicated.

Later in the day, Catherine, from the upper sitting-room, heard talking in the kitchen. Emmy was telling some long, vivacious story on which the little boy kept breaking in with questions put in a peremptory tone and answered by Emmy with equal briskness. She felt relieved and smiled to herself as, in bored abstraction, she went about her business upstairs. Working with an open door, she could hear that the talk continued. At last, from the landing, she caught the words,

'Go on – you are *not* an actress!' 'I am.' 'Well, then, do you go on the stage?' 'Did, when I was your size.' 'Say a piece, then. Sing!'

Then Emmy did sing; some racing, galloping song in a foreign language – Catherine could not even guess at what it was – a song which had a nasal wail in it, which was ugly, almost comic, yet was thrown out with such a coarse, storming vigour that Catherine herself stood transfixed. The adult listener stood transfixed, her mouth unconsciously yielding to an astonished, diverted smile which lingered throughout the performance. As for the little boy, he could be heard laughing, clapping, stamping in time with the intoxicating tune, and at the end breaking into frantic demands. 'Go on, go on! Do it again, Emmy! Go on – do it again!'

Catherine stood there in hesitation, still with the vase and duster in her hand which she had held throughout.

The little boy's reactions to herself and to the girl differed profoundly, as the next few weeks were to show her. With her, he was rather quiet and fond of posing her with odd problems. She felt that, having taken her in and become used to her, he did not 'mind' her; he accepted her without further thought and perhaps was actually soothed by the lack of demand on his emotions. She was humbly astonished on finding that he relied on her. She could not tell why she did not feel more warmly towards him, she felt surprised that she had ever thought him a disagreeable child. He was not even spoiled to any gross extent. But, unless treated firmly, he was inclined to be autocratic with her, appearing to think that she was there to wait upon him. Also, the dark, shining eyes could look meltingly when he wished to cajole. It was a surprise to Catherine to discover that this big boy of six liked to be petted at times and to be treated like a baby; liked her to rub her palm over his head, which she had done once

or twice at first, idly, amused at his springy hair. Now there were times when he would come and put his head in her lap. And she found what she would never have expected to find in a child, quite a degree of reasonableness. So why was he not dearer to her? He was charming.

But with Emmy it was all different. He was anxious, he was excited – for there seemed no other word for that air of warmth and the hot cheeks and the quick inclination to laughter or tears. More oddly still, it was not upon the whole a noisy excitement. She could not tell the cause of it, not even after she had studied curiously Emmy's behaviour. The girl joked, teased, rattled away to him about her own affairs, as if to an equal, and treated him altogether with a common-sense naturalness, which, if it lacked refinement, seemed otherwise unexceptionable. Any affection she showed him had a note of irony. The sentimentality she sometimes put on with him was always caustic (but did Simon know it?) She was, in fact, inclined to deal with him rather roughly, though with ill-humour. She stood no nonsense. There were moments when she made no bones about crying, 'You little beast!' and smartly cuffing him, at which Simon would howl and stamp frantically – he was not accustomed to such a type of correction. But none of this turned him from her. He was back at her side, begging, fondling her. Then he blossomed, he opened out, he was a bustling little creature, ingenious, tumbling about for her amusement, anxious, wild to please. Indulged in this, he showed off and became tiresome. But nothing brought him to heel more quickly than Emmy's threat to import her two boys from London – 'boys much nicer than someone she knew, boys she loved.' Simon passionately contested this. Jealousy fired up and burst out, and he was at first uncontrollably angry, till, reduced to an abject state of jealous fear by the unbearable threat, he

would fall into a pitiful subservience, promising brokenly to be nice, to be nicer than Emmy's boys.

But at times there was something less comprehensible, a stolid mood, a refusal to speak, when Emmy would declare that she didn't know what had got into the kid, with his sulks.

Sometimes, glancing out of the window and seeing Emmy and the boy together in the garden, Catherine tried to take an outside view of the situation.

Hillocks and heights there still were in that untamable domain, now again abandoned to the rank growths of spring, and upon one of these they had made a small clearance; Emmy had dug a little trench about it, and this was their 'lawn' – this was what their lawn had come to! It had the advantage of being far down the garden and private, half-screened and peaceful. There she could see Emmy sitting, drawing away industriously, and Simon squatting beside her. Then, 'What is she talking about?' Catherine might wonder with sudden uneasiness. Simon was so still. Well, he was watching Emmy at her drawing, or he was trying his hand at imitating her. He loved to see the little gross pictures welling from her deft pen – and it was not to be supposed that he would take any harm from their tendencies; it seemed impossible that a child of his age and upbringing could understand what he saw. And Emmy teased him and laughed at him, and that was all, crying, 'Sweetie-pie!' and pinching him when he became sentimental.

Catherine saw vaguely that some intervention was needed. She also knew that it would not come from herself. One movement might set the boat rocking dangerously. She could not endure it. She could not risk it.

MEANWHILE, the weather had altered at last; a heavenly spring was at its height, and with the return of the sun Emmy's appearance had undergone a kind of charming simplification. Her little flexible figure, the artless figure of a young, immature girl, clothed in the light-coloured, airy garments suitable to the season, was indistinguishably one with the crowd of fresh young women who flocked in the country town; and there was a subtle fascination in that false, spring-like charm which aped innocence.

Always flattering (but what did Catherine care, though she might smile a little?), always falling in willingly with her companion's ways, always tolerant and putting up good-humouredly with those fidgety defects of middle-age which Catherine felt in herself, Emmy was wonderful company.

But the fact was that Emmy had not much to bear with. This sweet concord was not all of the girl's making, as Catherine herself recognized.

In bewilderment, Catherine looked into herself: a self which had so often behaved intolerably with one on whom she had fastened her most real love, and was now amiable and complacent, on its best behaviour, with one for whom

she felt, at the best, little but an amused fascination. Like an evil-tempered child, a burden in its own home, who will be charming with strangers! It was a hideous picture – this picture which came up sharply in the light of her conduct with Emmy.

Yet her perverse unkindness with Clem she had always felt powerless to check. It was as if they had somehow formed a wrong, a tragically wrong, combination, as if something between them had always been working as an irritant. So, in fact, it had. Clinging together, in an emotional fusion brought about by suffering, they were hopelessly disparate. And that harsh, angry, half-vitiated love, so terribly contaminated by selfishness, was never any good to Clem, perhaps had never even been recognized by her, who had merely needed gentle affection.

But it was not Catherine's way to seek excuse for herself in psychological fatalities. It was done.

The fact that emerged in daily life in the cottage was a pleasant concord: Emmy's sunny adaptability; Catherine's gratitude.

No, she would do nothing to set the boat rocking.

This she was feeling while leaning from the window, in a warm, southern air, watching the ribbon-like shadows of the swifts which kept flickering across the sunny ground as the birds cruised over the house-top in small companies.

Simon was running in the garden; she could see his checked blouse bobbing among the bushes. Feeling with renewed surprise how well he had settled down with them, she went out, sat down by Emmy and praised her warmly, telling her that it was all her doing. However, she did add now, tentatively, 'But I think perhaps we ought to be a little more careful of our subjects when he's with us – I mean, not to talk of anything too grown-up for him. Yesterday, he went

off into one of those dull moods, did you notice? I wondered if we'd said anything to upset him.'

To this, Emmy suddenly replied, 'Why, really the kid's a bit morbid, isn't he? And well he may be, with a home like that behind him!'

'I haven't noticed. In what way?'

'Oh, lord, nothing much. Only he's just a bit morbid.'

'Well, of course Margaret did warn me he'd been troublesome. But, Emmy, as for his home, you really mustn't talk like that - what *can* you mean? Hungerford's a perfectly decent man. And the mother, I believe, was a charming woman, she was Margaret's great friend.'

Emmy turned wide, shocked eyes. 'Decent?' the expressive eyes said, making it unnecessary for the more expressive lips to form the word.

Catherine did not insist. It was true, too, that there was no name for Hungerford's misdeed. If he was guilty of anything, it was one of those mean little actions which cannot be brought home to the doer, or even named.

'I mean that Hungerford isn't, of course, badly conducted in any way which could influence the child.' But she spoke weakly.

Emmy drawled, 'Fancy! Old Foxy!'

Was it a game?

It threw light on the remarkable moral atmosphere of Emmy's upbringing that she seemed quite unable to visualize what type of man Hungerford was. It could only be supposed she genuinely could not, that she habitually spoke of him as if he was a fancy scamp who made a practice of it, as if nothing set him apart from the swindler who cheats women out of their money in lowlier walks of life (a type for which she had the greatest contempt and detestation) but the fact that he was 'classy'. Catherine laughed at such talk, but

in a kind of shock; this view of Hungerford was so grotesque.

But then again she thought it was a game. Emmy was merely play-acting and enjoying herself in the role of moral censor.

If so, perhaps it was a game to Catherine's taste. She did not attempt now to make her meaning any clearer, but she asked languidly, 'Morbid? Could you describe how?'

'Well, he likes fairy-tales.'

'Oh, Emmy, don't be absurd!'

But she was lying back, staring up into a deep blue sky. It was warm. She was exhausted. She again let the matter slide. And she went on lying there long after the two of them had run off together. Often now she would lie like this, in complete idleness, as if half-insensible.

For the slack, soft dream was offset by hours of sharpest, blackest reality, of cruel harrowing, when Clem was seen or her affairs dealt with, those small matters of business, to her so onerous and bewildering, with which her position with the Court had laden her. Her life was split clean in two. Desperation worked below, weeping nights intervened, and a deep looming, melancholic horror had destroyed all the former magical delights of the creative world which had always been her solace. There was need of diversion, there was need of the intoxicant. There was need of frivolity, nonsense - evil nonsense, it might be said; she had no illusions as to what all this was. Torment and mockery, each monstrous; it was the polity of hell. From the scene given over to the cries and capers of lightest high spirits, she made the recurrent journey to the mental clime where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. She existed and swung between furious extremes. And the fierce interchanges of sun and black night, laughter and howling, were like an onset of the very disease which raged in Clem, were in themselves like

the too violent alternations which precede mental breakdown. It was a rocking motion which brought on a deadly giddiness, which destroyed the balance more and more. She now simply succumbed to each mood as it came.

She would journey home, despairing, barely suppressing wild weeping, and would presently be sitting at a jolly tea-table, laughing helplessly at some unfastidious comedy mood of Emmy, in which the child figured, perhaps, most unedifyingly. An evening might follow, ending in physical riot between the two young ones, with huggings, kissings, mock-fightings, until the mishandled child was frantic or Emmy had had enough of 'little toms'. With nerves intolerant of the noise, Catherine would leave them to it.

A GRITTY dust blew down the road and in at the front-door which Catherine held open while looking up, from her disadvantageous position of two steps below the pavement, at the person who had knocked. It was late afternoon. The sun streaming down the road poured a sidelong light upon passers-by, who appeared briefly before door or window in their accidental poses, with the pleasant, diverting informality and in the hard lights and darks of a sunny snapshot. It was thus that her visitor was presented to her. For the high wind blowing in gusts and the noise of the passing traffic carried half one's words away and the caller's humorous sense of this was expressed in his abandonment of speech for gestures. It all had a touch of playfulness; and it was in itself a dry comment upon the character of her house.

'Do come inside,' she exclaimed. 'The dust blows in so —'

The tall, fair man of good appearance who was smiling and holding out his hand to her stepped briskly into the room. Yes, it was Hungerford. She closed the door and they shook hands.

At once, smiling and friendly but rather mannered, he had

put his hat down, crossed the room and was stooping his tall form to the low-set little window on the garden side to glance sprightly out. 'Charming!' he said, breathing the word with an enthusiast air which she felt to be exaggerative and satirical, though perhaps nervously so. 'And there's your lovely view – over which you both rhapsodized, I remember.' Here he threw at her a glance in which an amused gleam was perceptible.

'And how is your sister – how is my friend, Miss Clemence? As enchanted with it all as ever?'

In the whimsical tone which he gave this inquiry, in its impertinent form, she discerned his remembrance of certain overstrained expressions of gratitude, of artless flattery, which Clem had lavished on him; which might have been taken by a vain man as an indication that he had made something of a hit.

Yes, light, lively, the corners of his mouth twitching with smiles, Hungerford was amusing himself with the memory of Clem.

Catherine was thinking, 'Margaret hasn't told him, probably hasn't seen him. They've failed to mention it to him. He doesn't know. . . . Or has he perhaps just *forgotten*? Has the little fact slipped his memory?' But of course that was nonsense. He did not know.

At any rate, he had not, certainly had not, come to see how *they* were getting on, and so she explained, 'I'm afraid Simon is out.'

All this had been carried through in one impulsive and breathless sweep and left them both smiling mechanically.

However, at her introduction of the child's name, his manner notably changed, showing an underlying concern, and the word, 'Out!' escaped him in a tone not of surprise or disappointment but of thoughtfulness. This serious face, to

which the drawn eyebrows gave a feeling and anxious air, was a different face from the smiling one, the conscious one which he had hitherto shown, and it occurred to her that it was a face with which she was quite unfamiliar.

'So you've come all the way from Scotland – just to see him?' she said vaguely.

He explained, 'Oh, I have business down here – a flying visit I was obliged to make.' Now he was serious, and his genuine and confidential tone was a better one. 'Oh, it's not, Miss Hare, that I don't realize he's in good hands! Old friends of Margaret, as you are. But a boy, you know – a boy of his age – For one thing, he should have companions – I mean, children. My wife acted a little hastily, was pushed to it, in fact, by the awkward circumstances. He has been behaving badly with her, you know. A naughty boy, in short. But how do you find him? Troublesome, I'm afraid? Indeed, I'm extremely obliged –'

She was silent, and hung fire so long that he looked at her. It had occurred to her that by some remote chance that rage-inspired sneer in her letter had reached him. Yet, if so, was it possible that he, of all people, could have taken it at its face value? But now a fearful surge of feeling affected her blood, clouding her sight and making her temples beat. Still, she contrived to say, 'How do I find him? Why, he was a little difficult at first. But, fortunately, I have a young friend staying with me at present who is well used to small boys; she has two small brothers, and she is very good with him. Very sensible.' As she spoke, she thought that this was the case. 'He seems quite happy . . .'

Hungerford listened attentively, looking her in the face with an earnestness in which she detected an appeal. He mused, turned his eyes away, and seemed in indecision. He even put out his hand and fingered the match-board under

the window, and having done this struck it lightly with some papers he was carrying, as if to express contempt (as it seemed to her) of its gimcrack nature, or perhaps cynical knowledge of what its shoddy screen was designed to hide. But all this he did, clearly, quite unconsciously, his mind being full of his boy.

'Of course. Ah, yes, good. . . . And, after all, it's only a few months.' He was uneasy now, in open discomfort of mind; he would have been supremely thankful if he could have found some reasonable excuse for catching up Simon and carrying him away, time and means and some reasonable excuse, but had none of these. 'And a few months in such surroundings won't -' Then with a change to consciousness and the social tone, 'What splendid weather! It looks as if we're in for a fine spell. He's out of doors, I suppose, most of the time?'

'Much of it.'

He cast his eyes round the floor, where the boarding showed beyond the carpet and had been renewed; glanced at the ceiling, at the damp-stained wall. And all these little unconscious gestures betrayed him, to her eyes. Or was she now in such a sensitized state that the least hint of guilty consciousness reached her fearfully magnified? He expelled, at length, a resigned breath. 'Perhaps it's as well - that he's out, I mean. Perhaps I should take it as a sign and withdraw? I came quite on an impulse, you know - haven't even seen my wife yet to mention it - she would certainly have told me I should only unsettle him. What do you think? You won't thank me if I upset him again, I suppose? As well, perhaps, simply not to tell him that I came. He's really quite fit? And happy, you say? Yes, I know you sent a good report - but I had a hankering to investigate for myself.' A short awkward laugh. 'You know he has been a thoroughly bad fellow at home of

late! And I seem nowadays always so frantically busy. So you had some little trouble with him at the start?'

'He was rather difficult. He seemed to have made up his mind not to talk to us.'

'Ah!' Hungerford threw in, as if struck painfully.

'But my friend has quite won him over. It's really all her doing. She has taken him to Aldershot this afternoon. They're to have tea there.'

'A young girl, you say? Ah, yes, that's part of the trouble, though, he likes companions much older than himself.' And his brow clouded and he pinched his lip. 'He doesn't mix well with children of his own age - or younger - and he must learn to do so.'

Then he asked her various questions, which she answered calmly and equably. She took him upstairs to show him where the child slept; fortunately she had just cleared up Emmy's distinctive litter and set the room all in careful order; it was sunny and airy, and there had been space enough, with a little manœuvring, for Simon's cot by the window, where his toys were ranged on the sill. Nevertheless, he did not like it. His eye fell upon the little boy's playthings and for some moments he stood fingering these, while into his face there came a kind of stillness and misery, a look of pained tenderness. It was, or it should have been, affecting; yet where in all this display of solicitude was there any thought but for his own?

'You'll see that he doesn't play too near the stream? - but, yes, of course you will! It's deep and the current's strong.'

It could be seen that he was profoundly dissatisfied with the position, but that he was a man pressed with business, and, casting about in his mind for an alternative, could for the moment hit upon nothing. He lingered, pondered. He roused himself to speak courteously and with appreciation of the

evidences of her care. Singularly enough, whatever he doubted, it was not her trustworthiness. He simply doubted, perhaps, whether it was a house fit for human habitation.

At last, 'Oh, well, I see I must go! That's how it is!' he cried, throwing out his hands in resignation and laughing slightly. She had an impression that he was in a sense relieved, that he had dreaded a scene with the child.

'And you are both happy in your little house, I hope?' he then brought out carelessly, while picking up his hat, as if simply to introduce gracefully the moment of leave-taking, though his thoughts were elsewhere.

With that strange, weak insufficiency, that enormity of understatement, which seems the only possible tone when one is forced to make reference to a subject too anguishing to speak of at all, she answered, 'No.'

'You are *not* satisfied! But what is wrong?' But it seemed as if he did not take her to be serious, or perhaps that he did not intend to take her seriously; at all events, he kept to a light tone. 'Well, I see you've not tackled the garden yet. But perhaps you prefer it wild? I remember how you admired the wild flowers,' he said gaily, openly bantering.

'The house is very damp,' she heard herself answering at last, and was stopped by the sound of her own voice, so timid and uncertain of itself that it was absurd in a woman of her age, she felt.

Sure enough, he compressed his lips ironically. But now he was slightly sulky, barely restraining impatience, like a man made to feel awkward by a socially clumsy woman, and resenting it.

'Oh, these walls are not cavity walls, they are solid, they don't build like this nowadays; with such walls there is always condensation. But you can't, you know, expect of a house at least three centuries old – and at that price, too, a very

low price, a bargain price – that it shouldn't have its little weaknesses. You're aware, of course, that the unblemished period house has an altogether arbitrary value? You know I told you – I warned you – you remember, of course?' And he positively laughed, though no longer quite amiably, rallying her on some little lack of reason, some naïveté.

She said not a word more, and he went on talking, while a strange, detached feeling, something like, 'This is very interesting,' came over her, and she found herself studying the man's face minutely (such was her degree of detachment) till he presently turned his head away and went to the window again.

'Damp! Ah, *that*, I'm afraid, is simply a feature of the whole valley, as I told you at the time. In districts like this, the water table is very high. Yes, my dear Miss Hare – why – a stream, those deep ponds – the very name of the place, the Spring Plots, as it's known locally – come! What did you expect? You must pay for these picturesque accessories to your property. Didn't I warn you that the lower parts of the town are very damp – sometimes flooded? Oh, yes, undoubtedly I did! But you were so keen, you remember, you would hardly listen.'

'I didn't know it was called the Spring Plots – I have never heard the name till this moment!' Catherine exclaimed, almost lightly, in the mild inconsequent manner of one whose thoughts have been diverted by some surprising trifle at a moment of tragedy.

His manner was now quite contemptuous, it was so openly amused. 'Surely I did tell you? Perhaps you thought it referred to the season, just a pretty name? No, this ground is full of springs.'

He spoke very naturally, and once more glanced round the tiny room.

'It is cramped, I dare say. Far too small for comfort. But that you could see for yourselves. Well, now, what could we do about it? What about an extension? Have you thought any more of that suggestion of mine? You may remember I suggested that this middle room might be added to – a bay carried out on pillars, you know, over the right-of-way – even a few feet would vastly improve it. It would be a simple matter.' He had retained his good manners, he was prepared to be patient and helpful; he was, perhaps, genuinely sorry that they should have any complaint; if he was a little offended (because, after all, the whole thing had been a condescension on his part) he was now doing his best to hide it from her. But he was unguarded; and it was the slighting expression in his eyes as they now and again swept over her person which suddenly enlightened her.

'But that's only the local name, the Spring Plots? One would not have heard it unless one had spoken to the local people? It isn't the postal address – not the address given us by the agent –'

'Naturally not,' he murmured, smiling.

'And you knew it was called that, and why! And you knew that the neighbourhood was very poor, regarded like that locally. A very poor little bit of property – a squalid little house –'

'You also, I take it, must have seen that! Come, how could you expect to get anything else for the money? That was really – if you'll excuse bluntness – rather simple.'

Ah, yes, in a flash she understood it all; it was as if, with that glance, he had deliberately allowed her to look clear into his mind; and her sense of what she saw there was so overwhelming that she cried out involuntarily, in a voice which shook a little with shock, 'I see! Yes, I see how it is. You simply thought it was good enough for us!'

He turned his handsome face with a glare of astonishment – but astonishment which, she fancied, after the first second was mingled with a sort of guilty, smiling recognition; the faintest flicker, suppressed instantly.

Yes, that *had* been his thought. Exactly that!

'But – of course! If I had not thought it *good* enough –!' he mildly returned. And that adroit change of emphasis at once caught up the situation, re-adjusted the civilized screen over the abyss where the knife was used, into which she had all but precipitated them.

Then, deeply relieved, thankful to be going, he held out his hand, saying that he knew she would take good care of his little boy.

She stood motionless behind the closed door.

But did one not suffer so to be thought of, in the end, by light and prosperous people of much wider, much shallower experiences, as a creature for whom anything was good enough, a creature hardly possessed of human rights?

So he had thought this squalid dwelling-place good enough for Clem.

SHE was not outwardly affected by this event, but there was a change within, unknown to herself. She did not even mention to Emmy that Hungerford had called, imagining Emmy's incomprehension and her own inability to explain. After all, she herself found this treatment which had been meted out to them indescribable.

At breakfast next morning, other subjects were to the fore. Emmy was pondering seriously over letters from London, and, among these, one from her newspaper friend. They discussed this correspondence a little; Emmy gave family news out of her friend's letter, and Catherine, pleased with the diversion, questioned her.

'Yes, it's from Greg. Greg's been a real pal to me – but you wouldn't think much of him, not if you don't like that style of humour. . . . Oh, Gawd, just as I thought – here's Greg tells me Mumsie's old lad looks to be cooling off. The trouble with poor Mumsie is that she's got so fat. Unfortunately, she isn't one of the sort of fat artistes who do well out of it. Still, you must have heard her on the air, I reckon, some time, without noticing the name, for she had one or two numbers in the Wally Elfin show only recently. So you must have

heard her, some time, singing, "I'm as bad as you". She's got ever such a sweet voice!

'It was Ferdy who introduced me to Greg, worse luck – for that's the trouble, you see – Ferdy'll never let me forget it's through him I've made my millions. It was Greg who pushed me in. I should never have got where I am, never, under my own steam – for you don't nowadays. I couldn't draw much when I started, only I'd got a natural talent for caricature. Greg's a good sort, he's good at handing me ideas. But the trouble with Greg is that he's so often boozed. And it won't do in that profession – you've got to be on your toes all the while. Time was, as I expect you know, when the boys wrote in whisky – well, it isn't like that now. Sots needn't apply. And so I've told him. . . . And of course that must have been how he came to let on to Ferdy where I am –'

'So Ferdy knows where you are, does he? But it seems likely that he would have found out somehow.'

'That's true, so he would have. However – Well, I'm damned if I know what to do.' And she pondered, with a touch of gloom such as she rarely showed.

'The trouble with Ferdy –'

But it appeared to Catherine that the trouble with Ferdy was not so easily explained as the trouble which seemed to attach to most of Emmy's friends and relatives. Emmy had an air of drawing a veil. The trouble had a vague character, which seemed slightly ominous.

'A kind-hearted chap, too, Ferdy is. I remember him, when he was a kid, letting out a whole lot of birds and creatures in a shop under us, and the devil to pay! I was only a little bonnet then, but I've never forgotten it. Couldn't bear to see them boxed up. Can't, even now. Yes, he's got a heart, and that's what I like. He's been converted once or twice – it makes a difference. Still, you've got to scratch up the neces-

sary, haven't you, now? Don't get me wrong – Ferdy's a hard worker, he puts a lot into his business deals, and they're on the level – he's smart and the police haven't got anything to say to him.'

But did honesty reside in not being caught, Catherine wondered? She believed that it inclined to do so among such types as these.

'However, fact is, all our family's got temperament, except me. . . . What does that clock say? Well, now, this morning I've got to get down to it and no nonsense. Here's Greg fixed me with a bunch of wonderful ideas.'

The young woman's habits were purely bohemian; she could work with tense energy and concentration, and then for days on end she would do nothing. And obviously it was only the necessity to earn bread and butter, or else sheer relish in the use of her talent, which would ever move her to work at all. There was no question of orderly industry, no idea of self-discipline. It was the same with the work about the house. She could never be relied on to assist with the daily round, not even in tending Simon. She seemed not to understand the necessity for a certain amount of work every day, and would stand aghast before the idea that a room must be brushed and dusted at regular intervals. She would complain, 'What's the good of going out after invisible dust? It gives me the willies to see you creeping about after nothing!' Catherine, amused, had hitherto gone on with the daily performance of household work at her own pace.

But let there be a heavy job or the overwhelming mess of a surprise calamity, something sensational, and Emmy was in the thick of it. Above all, she liked a good household disaster, which not only gave the energies scope but also provided grounds for sardonic mirth. Burst pipes, phenomenal

falls of mortar down the chimneys – she magnified them, she dramatized them; and finally, *whose fault was it?* But Emmy had no idea of being a good little housewife; and this was a spirit to which Catherine easily succumbed. Her own boredom with domestic work had always been acute, and it was not for herself that she had ever done it. Now, who cared? Then there was no slaving over cookery. Nearly every day they went out to lunch rather than trouble to prepare food, though the expense was out of all proportion with the means of either of them. But a restaurant life was natural to the girl and she obviously preferred it. Besides, Emmy liked her glass. They got their meals at the Unicorn, the principal inn of the town which kept a high-class grill-room where the food was especially good. These were meals such as Catherine had not had for many a year, for nearly always Emmy insisted on ordering and paying, and Catherine allowed this as part of her contribution to household expenses. And how Emmy did it, she never inquired, suspecting that was best.

Such habits had a disintegrating effect on domestic life.

Emmy, having declared that she must work, began to laugh over one of her letters and then went on discoursing about her London friends; and to these details of a foreign world of scoundrelly vitality Catherine listened with a subtle pleasure. It was only when Emmy started to rough out sketches upon the littered table that she rose and cleared away the crockery; and while she was in the kitchen, she heard Simon saying, 'Who is Ferdy, Emmy? Emmy, is that a letter from *those boys* of yours? Who is Greg, who is Greg?' Emmy answered absently and rather sharply. Next it was, 'Emmy, are you going to be in the garden this morning?' 'I haven't time for you, my lad, today.' 'Why haven't you time for me?' came from Simon anxiously.

Catherine went out with some crumbs on a platter, and

after casting these down into the little clearing she stood for a few minutes to enjoy the sun.

'There's Simon getting worked up.' And she felt concerned.

But suddenly there came a fresh turn of thought, like an abrupt change in the wind; some process in her mind resembled a check and confusion among clouds, and then, like a dart of lightning thus produced, her whole attention gave a savage lunge in the direction of Hungerford. An idea in some such shape as this was the outcome: 'So you trust me? *That* is simple indeed!' Indistinct and very transitory, it was hardly recognized; and to it succeeded a much deadlier feeling, a carelessness and languor, and she thought of the little boy mildly, amiably, but without the least real concern.

She came in to find a stolid, silent child on her hands, Emmy having got down to work and driven him from her. Catherine could not interest him in anything and did not long try.

Now there came spells when day after day opened in the same golden haze. That first festival of the sun had heralded a rare summer.

They took chairs down to the lawn, now an islet in the midst of a wonderful forest of purple loosestrife and towering angelica, all flourishing again without let or hindrance; and there, in the sparse shade of the old apple trees, they sat talking in all but total idleness; Catherine never touching her pile of mending and Emmy pitching aside board or sketch-book to stretch out in the sun. Simon, meanwhile, scouted in the thickets and ran back with reports of sights and discoveries, tumbled about on the grass and did his winning tricks for them, revelling in too much attention of the wrong kind. He listened and took precocious part in the conversation. And now and again the two women would break off their talk to say, 'I spy -' for the little boy's entertainment. Or a game of ball would be begun, interrupted many times and usually ending unnoticed.

Or Emmy, under ardent questioning from Simon would tell of curious adventures which one could only hope were apocryphal, for they were not merely beyond belief, they

were scandalous. Simon listened with his whole attention. It was no good remonstrating. Emmy would merely turn eyes which laughed with good-humoured malice. Drowsy, Catherine watched the two young faces so closely, incongruously encountered under the light shadow of the apple boughs; the serious, impassioned one upturned, and the sparkling one whose hidden eyes perhaps did not tease alone, did not stop at that, but planted an unspeakable invitation, not with evil intent, but in sheer careless curiosity. 'Emmy - Emmy!' And the pouting mouth smiling and shaping itself sweetly on the adored name could be classed with the flowers, a pretty sight, a touching sight. 'Well, what is it, Simon, Simon?' Emmy mocked. But Simon could not say. Then, grubby, looking like a little street thug, he was off to the town on some small errand, to buy ices, to buy cigarettes for Emmy, or to spend a few pennies at the toy counter in Woolworth's.

So the days passed in the idlest frittering of time.

Why not take pattern from Emmy, now supine on the grass, with arms twined over her head, the very model of ease, all her urgent work thrown aside? Why not live like Emmy, hand to mouth, in disregard of the depths?

For indeed now there was no more to be done. Never again could the cuckoo taunt her as on the first spring; the cuckoo cried its taunt in vain. By sheer importunity, she had forced a change. At her insistence, Clem had at last been transferred to hands a little more tender or human, removed to a place where there was a better spirit - no more than that could be said for the change of state. It was merely the best of a choice that was all of evils.

These new conditions had brought some little relief to Catherine, but they also absolved her from further effort, or appeared to do so, and the relaxation was in itself dangerous

to one whose nerves and spirit were still at such a stretch, to one who had been driven to such extremities of exertion as she had been by then.

For the exertion had been desperate. First she had had to try to grasp with the stiffening wits of middle-age, dulled ominously by shock and exhaustion, those practical affairs of figures and business arrangements which she had never been able to grasp even in her youth. Now she could only do it in the haziest fashion, with a terrible effort, so that her blunders were ludicrous and continual; while humiliation was embittered by the sense that, after all, she had a certain intelligence, and of a pretty good quality, but of another class. Useless to expect these people to see it. To them, she was an utter fool. Still, she had blundered along to the end; thrusting her ungainly, excruciated person to the fore (she who had all her life shrunk behind Clem), raising her disused voice (she who had always had Clem's tongue to speak for her); time and again presenting herself before one or another of those authorities in whose power they were with some impracticable scheme, some crazed hope which had visited her in the fevered, horror-struck night; going from pillar to post, distracted, conscious of sneers, catching smiles behind her back, imagining cruelty where none was, only stupidity; shamefully imagining herself acquiring a character for aggression, branded as a shrew, a fury, God knew what! But finally succeeding.

Well? Should one call it 'the violent determination of the neurotic', as the know-all 'opposition' doubtless did? 'Desperation, that lamentable substitute for courage', desperation under intolerable pain, had been the single spur.

But of course struggle itself had supported her; and now there was a more subtly undermining part to play. The illusion of evil yielding to action was gone. Now there was nothing to

be done for the lost one but watch the infinitely slow progress of her degeneration.

In comparison with this, and after all this, what a trifling thing it seemed that in the sunny spaces among the weeds Emmy was laughing into the eyes of Simon!

A trifling thing, and there was no harm in the girl, no real harm – and so much good that it was a marvel in an undisciplined, untaught creature whose exemplars had all been of the worst. Ah, she was fascinated! Her sickened mind was fascinated by this open break with a deadly temperance.

In truth, it was hard to think what reward was adequate for Emmy who had created a little, tinsel, penny-whistle paradise within the dominion of hell, where sleep was possible, and laughter and human gossip, where one could sink with a deadened heart into a long swoon of forgetfulness.

Catherine began pondering what she could do to show her gratitude. And at length she hit upon a project, eccentric perhaps and all too simple-minded, but a practical thing and within her power. She could revise the will she had had drawn up when Clem had made her a gift of the cottage. So one day she spoke to Emmy to see how she felt about it. 'What would you do with this little place if ever it came into your hands? I mean, if it came to you by will. Would it worry you? Would it seem to you more trouble than it was worth? At least you might one day make a few hundreds by it. If I were to put your name into my will, after Clem's –'

They were sitting indoors that day while long, quiet rain refreshed the earth.

Emmy, in the act of retrieving a pencil from the floor, remained with an arm outstretched while looking up from the corners of her eyes into Catherine's face. Then she righted herself. Her expression had suddenly become purely, sternly disinterested.

'Haven't you got any other relatives?' she asked cautiously, like one who felt herself on delicate ground.

Catherine was silent, looking out towards the ponds misted by rain. She was silent some while.

Then she was forced to speak to Emmy as to one who knew all the story.

'Well, it wouldn't be the house itself, of course, unless Clem died before me, but its value'; and she explained laboriously (and was intently eyed and listened to by her hearer) that if she herself should be the first to die, the house, willed to Clem, would fall into the hands of the Court and the Court would sell it and sit on the proceeds and not allow them to be touched. It would only be a few hundreds anyway, she reckoned, but it would go to swell by a fraction Clem's income, and so she could not leave it away from her sister. The sum would, however, be kept intact by the Court. An insane person was not competent to make a will, so Clem's old will which left everything to Catherine would stand. Therefore, unless Catherine had provided for its disposal otherwise, and had left it to Clem on those conditions, at Clem's death (after her own) the money would go, with anything else she had, to a few distant, uncongenial relatives. 'And none of them needs it. Whereas you – You'll still be quite young when we're both dead. And a little bit of money might be of use to you some time in the future.'

Emmy gave a fervent expression to her eyes, but stopped at that, feeling it was a moment for sobriety.

'I think,' said Catherine, 'that it's called leaving it in trust. I must find out.'

'Yes, that's what it's called,' said Emmy, marvelling, thinking it was a marvel indeed how this poor woman got through practical life at all.

But Emmy, with her own intense family feeling, was really

a little shocked. Why, didn't Catherine see what she was doing: tying the good stuff up so that her poor sister couldn't blue it, if she felt so inclined, supposing one day she should come to her senses? Emmy could not conceive of her friend's state of mind, that extreme fatalism, product of an experience which had made Catherine incapable of entertaining for a moment the possibility of Clem's recovery.

'I'm not offering you much, you see, because, after all, you'll have to wait till we're both dead. Still, it's the best I can do, and unless you object I'll do it.'

But here, after thought, Emmy burst out earnestly, in real alarm, 'No, look here, dear, you mustn't dream of any such thing! They'd say it was undue influence. And I should be hailed into court and properly beaten up!'

'Nobody at all would bother about it,' Catherine assured her.

Emmy thought again. 'It's a lovely idea of yours – lovely!' she cried dreamily. 'Lord, I'd do a lot just to have anyone cherish such a nice idea of me! Well, it's just as you like, of course. And I shan't mention it to a soul. And it won't surprise me if you change your mind. But what's all this? – you'll out-live me by fifty years. Won't be long before I drink myself to death.'

This had reference to the fact that Catherine had not been able to hide a rather critical attitude towards Emmy's fondness for a glass. And so the matter was dismissed with a laugh.

Although she had preserved such a seemly tone of detachment, Emmy was profoundly excited. And it was all on the level, too, she had just walked into it honestly! She had never even dreamed of having a try at it, for she had taken for granted that the poor woman hadn't a penny-piece to her name. Like it? Would she not! *Worried?* She was really moved and gratified beyond measure at the bare idea that anyone

could think of her as a beneficiary – even though nothing could ever come of it. For of course nothing could ever come of it – on second thoughts. Looked at closer, the rosy mists subsiding, the position, with two lives, however shaky, between herself and the blessed money, did not call for the putting out of the flags. Nevertheless, she could not prevent her mind running on. Ah, she had had a presentiment that her luck lay in that little ad as soon as it had jumped to her eye!

But Emmy had already, at the first word of it, made an alarmed private note. 'Save us, I shall have to keep the glad tidings from Ferdy, or he'll be on at me to put her down the drain with a dose of rat-poison.'

And yet, whatever there was in this lurid reflection, if there was anything at all, it seemed probable that Emmy would not keep the news to herself. To impress her hearers, she might also add, 'And I should never be surprised if she put herself out one day. She's the sort to put herself out – melancholy. It's my belief she'll do herself in when she's alone again. And as for the sister – I have it on good authority, my boy, that she can't last long.'

MRS STEWART was a disappointed woman, and she had come to take a contemptuous view of her fellow-creatures.

She had married because she had wanted a son, but she would have done better to have joined a community of working nuns. In the ordinary affairs of life, she had considerable fortitude and expected others to have it. She was thick-skinned and material-minded. She would have made an excellent active, worldly-tempered directress, tough and sardonic, putting down the visionary with a ruthless hand; and would have been particularly successful among those who could not answer her back. Under such conditions, she would have developed a harsh amiability which might have turned her into an almost pleasant character.

That no son had come of her marriage had embittered her. She was always not so much softened as overthrown by the sight of a young mother. It was her one soft spot. The softening had commenced in her youth with the business-like exploitation of motherhood by her church, and so was quite out of touch with rationality. For she could hardly have been called fond of children. If she had a stern passion for boys, it

was because she was martial-minded. She had wanted a son so that she might mould him as she wished; she would not even adopt a child for fear of having incomplete influence over him; and she would have driven her son into the priesthood. But he would have had to be a fighter, one of those political priests who have a genuine if underground influence on public affairs; which could hardly have been in England; a fact adding to her bitter scorn of the 'heathen' country (where every department of life was 'mismanaged' because her church was shut out of its counsels) and increasing her perverse satisfaction in seeing any one of its fair countrysides devastated by her husband's operations.

Her life was dull, she spent much of her time in a state of angry boredom and therefore indulged petty curiosities. She had not enough to do, she was idle from contempt. Her conviction was that the majority of her fellow-countrymen were not worth bothering about, since they were, anyway, bound for hell. Fierce amusement was all they merited. Still, she could rarely refrain from trying to put people right. She had been the instrument of conversion a number of times in her life, but this had nothing to do with a passion for souls but came of her taste for subduing people. The domineering strain in her had been intensified by a religion with the same characteristic; she had unconsciously borrowed its dictatorial tone.

In Catherine she had seen a subject. She had spoken to Emmy of hating Catherine, but that had been in a spurt of temper. Antagonism she certainly felt to a point of view of which she suspected her; but it could even be said that she had taken a fancy to her, seeing her as a prospective victim or penitent, one over whom she might gain an exhilarating ascendancy.

Moreover, she had a legitimate reason for taking an interest in her — one which had slipped Catherine's memory.

One day, while in the town, Mrs Stewart felt a sudden inclination to have another look at this woman who both repelled and attracted her.

Although she had doubtless passed the cottage a number of times, she had never taken particular note of it, her interest in a neighbourhood in which she was only temporarily encamped being of the faintest. When she saw how small and humble it looked from the road, she suffered from a kind of impatience, like that of one feeling hampered by an opponent unworthy of his steel, and she banged on the door in such a style that Emmy, who was at work in the room within, made a false line, bounced up and received her indignantly.

Mrs Stewart had not even taken the trouble to think of any reasonable excuse for her appearance.

'I thought Miss Hare might like to come up to lunch one day -'

'Why, what on earth made you think that?'

Mrs Stewart did not bother to give any reason, but inquired in her abrupt and restless manner, 'Is she in?' In spite of hearing that she was not, the visitor all but pushed her way into the room with a casual, 'D'you mind if I wait?' and then, opening the door on the kitchen stairs, she glanced briefly down them, with a preoccupied face, like one refreshing her memory rather than satisfying curiosity for the first time. 'It looks so different when one approaches it from the road. Of course it isn't quite as poky as it appears.' She threw herself into a chair.

'Where is the little boy?' she asked next, looking round.

Emmy mumbled indifferently over a pen held in her mouth, 'Run down the road, or somewhere.'

Mrs Stewart then gave up talking to her for a moment and stared disparagingly about her. She looked out of the window on the road, the sill of which was scarcely as much

as eighteen inches above the pavement, and there saw an intermittent procession of passers-by. It was largely a baby-show at that hour. And whirled by in its carriage went the eternal tiny, tip-tilted nose, the pouting upper lip, the fruit-like bulge of the cheek, the feathery spring of the curls from the great head. Then the animated face of an older child was turned up in talk; or a little fair, square countenance in a pointed bonnet pressed close to the pane, with big, shadowy eyes which travelled curiously but could not see through the net curtain; or a plump hand was splayed for an instant upon the glass. The mothers of Ockentree were passing on their way to and from the shops. Everything shot and rattled by, being only a foot or two from the glass, at a great pace, giving an effect of hurry and liveliness. Cries, half-sentences burst on the ear and were cut off.

Mrs Stewart jumped up and posted herself before the other window, whence she soon remarked with ill-natured cheerfulness, 'Well, you'd have had a splendid view of the gibbet from here and the mouldering bones of malefactors - a healthy *memento mori* on your doorstep. What a pity we're so soft nowadays! Why, the last syllable of Ockentree, you know, isn't as pretty as it sounds; it has reference to the gibbet which once stood up there on Ocken Ridge and was a mark for miles round. The woods, I suppose, have grown up since those days. . . . Of course she was severely blamed at the time, and that might account for her refusal to talk of it - partly. . . . Well, I can't wait any longer. I'll come in another day. Tell her I called. See if that rings a bell.'

At this point, Simon could be heard charging down the steps and in at the back door, and in another moment had burst into the room, calling upon Emmy to look and holding up some little purchase he had just made. Emmy pushed him off, saying she was busy. But he wanted to get her into the

garden to see him try his new glider, and could be brought to think of nothing else; and when Mrs Stewart spoke to him he resorted to his naughty trick of refusing to answer, and when she took him by the shoulders he pulled away from her, with great rudeness. Simon's manners, like his lisp, now went almost unchecked and were back almost to their natural state. He again went to Emmy's side – but softly now, subdued. 'Come on, Emmy. Come out, Emmy. Sweetie-pie!' For this vulgar, amatory rag among endearments which Emmy sometimes bestowed on him, Simon took to be a serious term of affection, a loving pet-name, so that with head thrown back, he cooed it from pouted lips, cajolingly. Emmy again pushed him off.

Then Simon's head drooped, and, finding nothing else in the room to be of interest, and viewing the visitor with frank dislike, he escaped and was soon to be seen in the garden.

'The child seems rather subdued,' said Mrs Stewart gloomily. 'No doubt Miss Hare makes him obey her.'

'We're ever so *crool* to him,' and Emmy suddenly made herself to look as if she had no teeth, a sinister crone. Mrs Stewart gave her a fillip on the cheek.

In fact, everything between these two showed another state of affairs than that portrayed by Emmy to Catherine. Their acquaintanceship had either differed then from Emmy's report of it or had progressed since.

Seeming to have forgotten that she could not wait, the visitor now began to occupy herself with opening cupboard doors, looking at the fly-leaves of books, and so on.

'I feel annoyed with you,' Emmy said, sighing and giving in to sociable feelings. 'What have you come for, eh?'

'To invite her – Well, as I said.'

'You'd do better to scram.'

'Someone ought to try to bring her to a better frame of mind.'

'Yes, but you don't want to let rip like a bull in a china shop.'

'Hold your tongue, girl,' said Mrs Stewart with temper. After a pause, she added graciously, 'You're being very good to her. But, come, now, isn't it odd? Unnatural. Does she never discuss it with you?'

'Never a word. Nor, as I say, do I regard it as tactful to refer to it.' Emmy gave dignified emphasis to this statement.

'Back in the spring, you know, she was making a laughing-stock of herself, going about all over the place, begging people to help her to move her sister from the hospital. And writing absurd letters –'

'What? A laughing-stock? Are you sure? A laughing-stock?'

'Well, then, if you prefer it – a spectacle.'

'That's better. Just for a moment I felt as if all my simple trust in my fellow-men was beginning to slip.'

'She is really hardly sane. What a disgraceful thing, to put a child into her hands! How do you get on with her?'

'We're real friends!' Emmy spoke in a tone of quiet gratification. 'And the other day she did a thing which, really – pleased! I was overcome. Never should I have expected such a mark of affection! I can call it no less. Esteem and affection, as they say. Such a thing as you might expect of a bosom friend, granted. Were I only at liberty to tell you!'

But Emmy, while going on to hint lavishly, did not explain what this thing was, though Mrs Stewart pressed her with impatient curiosity. 'Come, now, what do you mean, Pussy?' she said blandly.

Emmy had something else on her mind. Turning round with her arm over the back of the chair, she took a serious tone,

reverting rather plaintively to the matter of Catherine's silence.

'And it is a shame, because it so happens I'm one who could be sympathetic. For in fact I know plenty about those places, because of Ferdy's father – he was afflicted –' (for Emmy was serious) '– and dumped in one of those places for years. And they had their bellyful of it, Mumsie and Ferdie did, trouble with money and all – but I don't remember much about it, of course, only heard it afterwards. No, not my father, he's my stepbrother – you remember, I told you, Ferdy's my stepbrother. And he was a good son to his father. But to this day he has a thing about being shut up – it makes him act queer. . . . And meanwhile, you see, Mumsie went and took up with my dad. For what else was she to do, being the live sort she is, but take up with some other man? I reckon it sent her wrong. Rivers is the name I go by, because it happened to be the one that was handy at the time. But it might just as well be Allen. Or anything else.'

Mrs Stewart made a sour face, but was clearly amused; and they went on gossiping easily on these lines, hardly as friends, perhaps, but as familiars of the kind whose pleasure in each other's company is entirely critical, till Catherine opened the front door.

'EMMY tells me we met at Mr Longwood's,' Catherine said with a reluctant tongue, and looking down. 'But I'm afraid I hardly saw anyone there.'

'Oh, yes, we've met,' Mrs Stewart answered meaningly.

Emmy got in a dig at her crony. 'She knows you hate her. I told her you said so.'

'Pooh, surely you didn't say such a thing?' exclaimed Mrs Stewart, suddenly laughing and looking pleasant; and she glanced at Catherine with perhaps a touch of embarrassment, which she covered up with a peculiar, teasing air. But this was momentary.

Staring full at Catherine, she appeared surprised. 'You still look rather unwell,' she remarked. 'I suppose you're just fretting about your sister?'

Here Emmy, exclaiming tenderly that poor little Simon looked so lonely out there, leapt up and scampered from the room.

'Mm. You still have quite a scar,' the visitor went on, taking Catherine's hand and not releasing it. 'That blow on the head probably helped to confuse you afterwards – and of course you could hardly see at the time.' She spoke in a rather milder

tone than usual; and then, while pressing Catherine's hand and looking into her face compellingly, she added, 'It was I who got in and helped you that morning. We ran down our garden when we heard you call and were the first to reach you. It was my husband who took the chief part in finding her. She was wandering there -'

Catherine shuddered visibly but said nothing. Mrs Stewart dropped her hand.

'Well, dear me, it was not so very heart-rending. Don't worry - she was only wandering there, did not seem particularly frightened, just dazed. And of course shivering.'

This, too, brought no answer.

'So you see you need not make such a terrible tragedy of it.'

Catherine's lips parted, but merely to draw in breath. 'It was you, then, who went to the police,' she said reflectively, after a moment.

'Well, good heavens, of course it was a police matter anyway. Attempted suicide is a police matter. And as it had in fact more the look of attempted murder - She was very wet, and nobody knew whether she had got so by accident. Didn't they question you? - take a statement from you?'

'Yes - yes - a lot of questions. It was really a trial. But there are murders which don't show.'

'I don't know what you mean by that! I should be careful how I used the word murder, if I were you. Even now.'

'That was what you suggested to them?'

'I did *not* suggest it. It was not my business to suggest anything. I merely gave them the facts. It was wicked carelessness at the best. One can really hardly believe the thought of danger didn't occur to you.'

'So you told them that your suspicions had been aroused.'

'You're laughing at me. I confess that disgusts me. You've no right to laugh. Do you know what you said to me that

morning? You laughed, and you said, "I've brought the pack on her" - or some such words. "They're like dogs. When they find her, they'll carry her tenderly in their mouths, careful not to spill one drop of blood, so that she can be tortured for fifteen years" - some such stuff. Oh, what a tragedy!' Mrs Stewart had quoted the words scathingly, with the inverted commas heavily indicated and that overbearing sneer which counsel use to discredit the statement of a witness. 'And you laughed.'

'Perhaps I was half mad.'

'I saw you were,' Mrs Stewart acknowledged dispassionately, 'and of course gave them my impression. At the same time, I was bound to tell them what you'd said, how you'd behaved. What do you expect? *Of course* I told them! Do you think I would countenance a mortal sin - a crime? Well, I'm glad you're not laughing any more. It's time you repented. Do you mean to tell me you really did not think of the danger of leaving her like that?'

'I didn't mean to tell you anything. Still, I'll tell you now - for you may as well understand. Yes, I saw it, and left her to do for herself what I knew in my heart she would never have the strength to do.'

'I am not listening,' Mrs Stewart said with calm indignation.

Neither of them had sat down. There was a pause, during which they both turned to the window and looked out on the garden where Emmy and Simon were to be seen running about with the glider. The glider would not fly, but Emmy had made this so funny that it didn't matter.

'How that child's looks surprise me,' Mrs Stewart observed. 'He's curiously unlike his father, that's what I mean.'

'So you know Mr Hungerford - you, too, know him!'

Mrs Stewart replied off-handedly, 'Well, very slightly. My husband happened to see him in the garden when he came to

look at this cottage. Leon had crossed over and was having a look round, just out of curiosity. We hadn't been here long ourselves, then. They got into conversation and Leon brought him up to lunch. An attractive man, don't you think so? I thought him very agreeable.'

Catherine, considering the other's tall and arrogant figure, had reflected, 'But this cannot possibly be the "little woman"!'. She asked aloud, 'Did you speak about the cottage?'

'Oh, I forget,' Mrs Stewart said carelessly, with her chin in her hand and her eyes on Simon. 'I believe we mentioned it, among other things. (That girl is very vulgar, you know, it seems a shame to put her in charge of a well brought-up child. But I dare say many a servant might be worse.) The men discussed building conditions, as far as I remember.' Then she turned her attention on Catherine again.

'Yes, you still look rather unwell,' she repeated. 'You're fretting about your sister, of course. Well, she will die. Most probably very soon. It's highly unlikely that she'll go on long. A mental illness with origins like that - physical - the blood, the arteries - such illnesses are always hopeless, but they're usually brief, as mental illnesses go. "Fifteen years!"' cried Mrs Stewart, quoting melodramatically and pulling a most satirical face. 'Why, you stupid, she can't last long. It's not, after all, a replica of your mother's illness, so I understand. You should be thankful.'

Catherine spoke impulsively. 'You remind me, when you talk like that, of an important man I had to see some while ago. He jeered at me in that same fashion.'

She was remembering an interview, for which she had been called to London, an interview not with the Master of the Court himself, as it happened, but with one deputizing for him. She had written a letter, a statement of the facts, an

appeal, and put it into the hands of their solicitor to lay in what form he thought best before the Court. She had had the idea at the time of bringing Clem home, and, since it would have been impossible to bring her back to the cottage, had had a scheme for renting a place, and this of course would have involved using Clem's money. The scheme was, perhaps, not practicable, or not as it had seemed to her in her fevered planning; she suspected that now. But then she had pinned all her hopes on it. Her judge had taken her letter, that desperate cry (which of course she had never meant him to see in that form and had not addressed to him) and in the presence of several people had read aloud from it phrases which had no doubt seemed to him absurdly artless, or perhaps even impudent, using just that tone of contemptuous sarcasm in which Mrs Stewart was now indulging - and the intellectual quality of the man had made no difference, the manner was exactly similar.

She had not expected it. She had thought this personage would be courteous, even sympathetic. She had comforted herself with the supposition that it would not be like an interview with some jack in office. He was hostile from the first moment and of course she could only guess that a bad name had preceded her, fastened on her by a report from the hospital.

This incident of several months ago had unnerved her so utterly that she could not remember it without the most painful agitation. Like all the rest, it had been too much for her, something she should never have been forced to go through; and she herself was quite conscious that the affair had not improved her mental grasp. She could not go on with what she had begun to say - for she had had a passing impulse to tell her companion of the London interview. After groping for words, she merely added, 'You seem to take fright

at things spoken from the heart. Is that just emotional immaturity?'

Mrs Stewart opened her eyes a little, she seemed a little taken aback. But it was only momentary. 'Oh, well, you see? There you are. People haven't time for hysterics. You shouldn't upset yourself. It's so useless.' (At this point, Emmy returned, sidling round the door.) 'You aren't the only one to suffer in such a manner – these things happen to people. Yes – even *twice*. Good heavens, why not twice? Why not three times?' Mrs Stewart asked zestfully and with the same curious jeering emphasis on the word 'twice', as if she really could not help it. 'Well, it's hardly like breaking one's neck, after all!' she went on with dry humour. 'So why not twice? Well, yes, it's bad, I agree. But what did you expect? It was almost bound to happen with one or the other of you, that you would inherit insanity. Yes – if not both,' she concluded, looking into Catherine's face in an intent manner. Emmy stood petrified.

'Pussy,' said Mrs Stewart, turning to the girl amiably, 'I've just been assuring Miss Hare that her invalid won't last long and that she should be thankful. You can just remind her of that when she gets suicidal.'

'We're keeping you from your work,' Catherine said to Emmy with compunction, and with a certain quiver in her voice which was not of distress. 'Mrs Stewart is just going.'

It seemed that Mrs Stewart could take a hint of that size, for she picked up her handbag.

'Offer your sufferings to God,' she directed in a self-assured, authoritative manner, as if suggesting a simple, well-known remedy, a matter-of-fact measure which anyone of sense would take. 'Don't you see what you should have made of your afflictions? The desert can be made to blossom – It *can*, you know.'

Emmy drew a long breath when the door had closed on their visitor, and then with restraint she said, 'She's simple, that woman is. Got a simple mind. And "Pussy", too! That's hardly a name to give a decent girl. But, as I say, she's simple.' She was all set to pull her crony to pieces with adroit fingers, but a wary eye showed her Catherine standing there, smiling to herself.

Catherine was thinking that was something she had heard before, and wondering at the coincidence and the unlikely missioners; the bad spot made to blossom like the rose.

'A woman,' said Emmy, 'who doesn't let her sympathy get out of hand.'

THE summer burned its way towards the autumn, and still there were long series of beguiling days. Drought set the heaths blazing, heavy palls of smoke were to be seen hanging over the horizon, the hooters wailed near and far and Simon ran out two or three times a day in the hope of meeting or even overtaking the clanging bells.

But from that oozing soil the destroying sun merely drew a tropical luxuriance.

Lost, surrounded by her ravening weeds, overcome by the ground she had designed to conquer, she now reposed in idleness undisguised. Only a few months ago she had been struggling desperately to preserve some semblance of a garden, and a little sadness, at least, might have been expected to mingle with her resignation. But it was not so. The serious view of the cottage had been disposed of by Emmy; and now that she had no longer to pit herself against the riot of the jungle, there was no need to strain against the affinity with it in her own soul, the dubious fellowship with its anarchy. Let it all go as it would! She no longer made any pretence of work, had not a thought of facing the more and more critical condition of her own affairs, sometimes even neglected to

visit Clem, and made no more efforts on her behalf save those enforced upon her. So she lay overwhelmed and uncaring, allowing physical trifles to acquire a strange power over her mind, to absorb all her attention with their soothing triviality, as sick people do.

The willows shimmered, the poplars kept up their shelly rustling; clouds of butterflies hovered over the weeds, their little giddy shadows dancing with frolicsome effect, and for hours on end she could hear some small monotonous bird close at hand in the bushes and yet feel no vexation but rather was lulled by the soft, iterated sound. Simon found a large, glistening beetle whose carapace shot rays of gold in the sunshine, like a nugget of metal, and it was an hour's wonder to her. She did not know what it was and thought she must go to the library and look up the creature's designation, but that, too, did not get done. Another intense pleasure was to watch Emmy's face, down-turned, full of reflected light from the white sheet stretched on the board, like the gilded, delicately hollowed face of a doubtful angel whose hidden eyes would have betrayed it. Or she could watch – or close her eyes to them if she pleased – Simon's little clumsy hands playing with fire.

Often, while the young ones roved the town or made excursions farther afield, her nights being half sleepless, she would sleep outright, seduced by the warmth and stillness, even before the noon.

Waking one morning from one such doze, she saw Emmy approaching through the flowers, and something in this approach, sinuous and a little wary, conveyed from afar a degree of anxiety and communicated the fact that the girl was charged with a shifty message. Catherine noticed that she had changed her dress, and without observing the details of its fashion, for such things escaped her, she gathered that it

was of the sensational style which was really Emmy's natural style, but which she had lately abandoned for country simplicity. And was that a flowery coronet she was wearing? Emmy's ballet skirt blew out so that she had to catch at it and step delicately past the weeds. Catherine could tell the exact moment when the girl became conscious of her regard; that moment when she gave her head a solicitous tilt, when the eyes narrowed in a honied way and the big mouth began to curl and drive back its corners so that the cheeks dimpled. 'She is going to ask me something - a favour,' Catherine thought apprehensively. The next minute Emmy stood before her.

'I suppose you wouldn't care to see some friends of mine? Ah, never mind if you don't!' she cried in the same breath.

'Well, it's Greg,' she explained at Catherine's question. 'And Roy's come as well - another friend of mine - because the car's his, you see. And, unfortunately, Ferdy's with them. Oh, they won't stay more than five minutes, you know - not if you don't wish it.'

Catherine looked up into the leaning face. It was the face, the voice, the air of a charmer, down to the last nuance, caressive, wooing; but it was consciously, funnily so - Emmy knew it and was taking herself off, and this gave pungency to what would have been cloying and displeasing. In smiling surrender, Catherine consented.

She consented, but not without wondering at herself, not unconscious that an inner voice cried warningly, 'No, draw the line here!' She rose and tried to put herself to rights. The fumes of a dream still hung in her mind, clouding judgement. 'Why, it's past twelve,' Emmy answered her inquiry. 'Oh dear, surely not! I was dreaming - How untidy I am!' she protested, thinking in sudden shame of how she had been dozing there even in the morning.

'You look very nice - ever so nice,' Emmy breathed, assisting her. 'Really they want us to go and have lunch at the Unicorn. . . . Let me put your hair right - that's better.' Catherine sighed and submitted herself to Emmy's ministrations. Emmy stood behind her, arranging her hair. 'Why do you bother so much? You always look dignified.' 'Little flatterer, little honeypot,' Catherine thought, smiling lazily to herself. No, she did not mind, it exhilarated her.

'But what does your brother want? What has he come for?'

'What's he after, you say? Why, Emmy and her millions.'

'Well, Emmy, I don't mind Mr Gregory so much - or your other friend, I suppose - but, going entirely by what you yourself have told me, you know -'

'You could have done without Ferdy. Oh, so could I!' Emmy's voice, close to her ear, had a plaintive note.

'And in fact isn't it rather odd of Mr Gregory to have brought your brother with him?'

Emmy answered in surprise, 'Why, bless you, it isn't like that, you know. It's Roy's car - but Roy'll do anything Ferdy wants. As for Greg, it's just that he thought he'd better come with Ferdy.'

'To keep him in order, you mean?'

'To have a try at it,' Emmy dryly amended.

'Well - that's good of him,' Catherine said doubtfully.

'Oh, he's a good sort, he's been a good friend to me,' the girl assured her. 'Only weak as water.'

She followed Emmy up to the house, and there stood two of the young men, waiting, and were amusing themselves with Simon meanwhile, teasing him, Catherine judged, for Simon was excited and pushful, using his top notes. She saw first a large, fat young man in the early thirties, with a red face, of exceptionally gross appearance. Such was her first impression as, now thoroughly reluctant, deeply regretting her com-

pliance, she came forward to receive her visitors. A young man who looked a mere conglomeration of all the sensualities. 'So this is Ferdy - and looks it,' Catherine thought. Beside him stood the second visitor, a somewhat younger man, a nice-looking little fellow, fair and mild - but on a second view it was difficult to tell his age, his little sallow face was seen to be full of the hard lines scored by grimaces, some of which must have been very ugly. Both faces smiled at her, ingratiatingly, rather foolishly, which improved neither of them.

The next instant, however, Emmy said sharply from behind her, 'Where's Ferdy?'

'Keep calm,' one of them answered. 'He's up with the car.'

'Well, Miss Hare,' said the fat, red one, Gregory. 'Heard all about your raw deal with the cottage - dirty luck.' (Emmy's face, beside him, at this showed a little anxious.) 'Yet I must say it's a pretty thing to look at. Period, and that . . .'

And then all three of them, as if moved by a shared thought, turned to look at the cottage. They looked with peculiar intensity, Catherine felt, in an unaccountable silence; but she did not get as far, in that moment of fast-coming impressions, as to think they were like people taking stock of a piece of property in which they had an interest. But perhaps they were merely relieved to have ready to hand some common subject for conversation. For they were all embarrassed, all conscious in their several ways that as a party they were now an odd mixture.

Greg was the first to break through this. 'Sorry about it all,' he turned to Catherine to say. 'I mean, the whole thing,' and she was almost shocked on meeting those little, jolly, piggy eyes and reading in them genuine good feeling - shocked to silence when she realized that he had heard of Clem and did

indeed mean the whole of it. She said, 'Yes - yes -' But her attention had wandered.

Then she heard a quick exchange.

'What d'you say? Six hundred?'

'Six hundred? Well, come on, you've got another bob's-worth. Try again. Six hundred for that perfect little jewel!' This came from Emmy, with intense vivacity.

Catherine turned her head and then saw Emmy's rounded eyes fixed on the cottage, rounded and fixed in the lustful glare of a cat which stares at a bird; but when she met them, this expression was entirely gone, gone so quickly that the voice of gratification in which the girl cried, 'Hear that, dear? Ferdy thinks you could get a thousand for it!' seemed to Catherine touchingly benevolent.

'No - nonsense,' Catherine said, laughing.

But prices had so risen, they assured her in chorus, standing round her, and all appeared wonderfully well-informed - considering that country housing seemed hardly to be in their way of business - on the state of the property market, which they termed a racket.

'However that may be,' she answered at length, 'I must live somewhere.'

'Of course you must, of course you must!' Greg agreed heartily.

And a little silence fell, and then it was proposed that they should go down to the Unicorn for lunch.

'But you really must wait till Simon's had a wash and brush-up - and I must change the child's clothes,' Catherine protested, coming to her senses. For Simon was wearing his jeans and a soiled tartan shirt; it was his play-suit and did well for the garden. At first Catherine had been very particular about the appearance of a child who had come to her with his little wardrobe so correct and in such beautiful order; a child who

had certainly never been allowed to run about like a little hooligan. But Emmy, saying, 'Why wash things, when you needn't?' had bought him this outfit, which he wore continually, although Catherine disliked it, thinking that, among its other harmful effects, it encouraged swagger and roughness. The little boy had no mind to be parted from his treasured jeans, in which he felt a big fellow, and the others laughingly backed him. Did it matter what the urchin wore? Of course it did not! Catherine felt she could not keep the whole party waiting against its wishes. So now Simon was to go to the Unicorn in his dirty jeans, looking a regular little rough, with grubby face and hands. While she helplessly considered this, the others began to make a move. She stopped to lock the back door.

'Emmy,' she called hastily, 'do see that Simon doesn't run out into the road, will you? He's excited and he'll want to look at the car.' Emmy scampered off. Turning, Catherine found that Gregory had waited for her, and was now telling her, 'I'm afraid I've come to take Emmy away from you. Fact is, I've got her the offer of a staff job, so she'd have to come back to town.'

Catherine forced herself to say, 'I wouldn't argue against it for anything – if it's really something worthy of her talents? But she has been such a great comfort to me!' she could not help crying out, and a tone of despair escaped into the words, in spite of herself.

Greg halted with a foot on the first step to look round at her. He rubbed his hand over his head. 'Well, don't worry – she isn't too keen,' he said, but without conviction and obviously just to be kind. 'But she's a clever girl, you know, is Emmy. Not many girls with her background could handle such an opportunity, but she'll manage, she'll learn. She'll soon see what's needed – and what isn't needed. She's sharp. And,

what's more important, she's tough.' And Greg smiled admiringly. 'Though, in a way, I like to think of her staying with you. Country air – and nice manners – and so forth. It's been a good influence. And her family off her neck for once, poor kid.'

'So they're really like that? It's too bad. What has her brother come for, do you suppose?'

Greg seemed to hesitate. 'Why – just to try squeezing her, of course. She's making good money. I want to keep hold of his collar, if I can.'

'Oh, but Emmy's so sensible – I can't think she'd allow him to sponge on her to any serious extent?'

'Why, you know, she'd do anything for her family. She'd stand by Ferdy to the gallows' foot – and probably will.'

Catherine was silent, and, feeling as if her heart was slowly being compressed, began to climb the steps with Gregory beside her.

'Yes, Emmy's a good girl,' he repeated vaguely. 'She's a good girl – in herself.'

These steps, at right angles to the flank of the cottage, were not really a staircase but a stepped slope made of flints, like one of the stepped lanes of Clovelly, and were wide enough to allow them to walk side by side and to face each other when they stopped, as they now did again.

Then, striving to express herself tactfully, she remarked that she greatly hoped the job he was offering Emmy was of a better quality than her present one, and she attempted to hint that, in her opinion, Emmy's present employment was coarsening.

Greg paused again, with a wrinkled brow. Perhaps this was a side of the situation he had never considered before. Yet it seemed likely that he did not attach much importance to Emmy's refinement, while it was clear that her words had

given him something to think about. They stood face to face, committed to a moment of privacy in the well of the steps, in the chilling shadow of the old walls; and his eyes met hers with frankness, grave and estimating.

'A word in your ear. Have you any friends of your own? Near you, within reach? You know what I mean? - people of your own sort.'

'I suppose - yes, one or two,' Catherine admitted, too much taken by surprise to be disturbed.

'Well, stick to *them*. Keep in touch with them. . . . Mind, I'm not saying a word against *Emmy*, not one word - *Emmy's* all right - Why, hell, where's the fellow got to, then?' For Emmy had suddenly looked over the wall on the road and announced that there was no Ferdy.

Catherine stood in the sun and put her hand to her head, while staring dubiously at the showy car, which she now understood to be hardly Roy's property, but borrowed. Greg's words had left an impression which she seemed to feel physically, connected with the chill of the damp shaft. She felt slightly bewildered, with a sense that she was being carried away past her reckoning.

And a more queerly assorted party could hardly have been got together, she thought, as they trooped across the pavement and packed into the conveyance, to whomsoever it might belong. She hoped the owner had been aware of the loan. It was decided to count Ferdy out.

The courtyard of the Unicorn was crowded with parked cars and the large restaurant was full of business and professional men from the shops and offices of the little community, older retired men of the same type and women of leisure and means from expensive villas out in the unspoiled country who had been spending a morning in the town with their shopping lists. They were people who represented the

gentry of the neighbourhood, such as it was nowadays. Voices were cultivated, often rather too notably so; little cliques communicated with their members in passing in and out, and the room was full of friendly, lunch-hour gossip.

Catherine had always felt ill at ease in these surroundings.

Now she sat down with her party, resolute not to care; only marvelling that they had not been turned away at the doors.

The odd thing was that she really did care very little. Her feeling of unnatural complaisance persisted. She examined her companions dispassionately, found humour in their slightly grotesque variety, and even in what was raffish and unseemly. Emmy's new dress, she now observed, would have been charmingly in place in a theatre chorus, with its low neck-line and exaggerated corsage, revealing in so much brighter a fashion than the frank and simple sun-dresses which appeared here and there; and the same could be said for the morsel of sparkling stuff, made of net, flower or ribbon, with which Emmy's head was decked. Roy's clothes were villainously smart; Greg's were villainously shabby, stretched almost indecorously over his paunchy bulk as if too small for him. Simon simply wanted washing - but now Catherine suddenly noticed that this was not all, that his hair was standing up in an inch-long fuzz all over his head. She herself, in a summer dress an incredible number of years out of date, felt crumpled and untidy. Nor did she usually go about without a hat, for she was too conscious that her hair, very fine and soft and always unmanageable, had not the sophisticated finish required for the street. Besides, the hot sun on her uncovered head resulted in headache and dizziness. Yet here she sat with all the shortcomings of her hairstyle exposed, and in truth felt that the sun had given her a dazed sensation. To what else could this dullness of feeling

be attributed, and the moral languor which made her so curiously tolerant of unseemliness?

It only needed Rippy, she thought, to make the picture complete. But Ferdy did not appear.

No, she had no sense of shame, she sat there without thought of protest; all the concern she felt was concern at her threatened loss. With hands clenched in her lap, she sat flushed and trembling, lest she was about to lose her little jester and pussy-cat.

As for the others, from Simon to Gregory, they seemed to be taking a jolly and naïve satisfaction in making a good stir. They talked at the top of their voices, they laughed as loudly. Roy was impertinent with the waiter and played an asinine trick upon him, which resulted in a small breakage. Simon laughed with all his heart at this; it seemed to him famous. Gregory had now no thought for anything but his food and drink, and spread himself to the meal and scooped it in with heartening gusto. His appetite assuaged, however, he began looking round him, blinking his little eyes, moist with his exertions. He espied two nuns passing the window, and from the deep bed of his animal satisfaction looked benevolently upon them. But they suggested to him several improper 'ideas', at which his friends shrieked with laughter. Drinks unknown to Catherine were poured and dispatched with what seemed to her an alarming celerity. She touched no intoxicants herself; drink did not tempt her, she was not likely to fall from grace in such a manner. But sometimes, putting her hand to her head, she felt as if the others' drinks had affected her; she felt not quite normal, or as if something was a little wrong in the scene itself.

Certainly to the outward eye much was wrong. Greg had lunched too well, though the dry and wizened Roy showed not the slightest disorder, unless it was in the frankness of

his approach to Emmy. Greg's increased jollity led him to give of his best in the way of joke and anecdote, but at length it reached a point when Emmy told him to shut up. This reminded him that the present party was something a little different from his usual company, and, breaking into a good-natured smile, he took Emmy's reproof with the sweet humility of a child. At this, Catherine could barely control her amusement. This angelic amiability, contrasting with the coarse and low sentiments, the real foulness of thought he had displayed, appeared to her, in her peculiar blunted state, comic to a degree almost delightful. She did not view the man with any sense of disgust, felt indeed that it was impossible to help liking him.

For her curious moral inertness persisted.

Emmy was making free with her story, hinting more and more freely and exposing the details of the tragedy in a way which showed she and her friends had already discussed it thoroughly, holding her grief up to cynical or careless eyes, now more than a little jolly – and Catherine was almost indifferent to this fact which a little while ago she would have found intolerable.

'Don't go, Emmy,' was all her besotted prayer. 'Don't leave me!'

Yet she was conscious at last of some surprise at what seemed to be an unaccountable interest in herself, till, beginning to listen more intelligently, she made out what the attraction was. Emmy inveighed against rules and authorities, against walls and prisons, inveighed against hospitals of that kind which 'hadn't to answer for anything they chose to do, hand in glove as they were with the law – a pretty pair, medicals and legals together, a pretty pair of devils into whose claws to fall –' and story was capped by story from the others. Then Catherine saw that the facts of Clem's case could not

have been put before people on whom this point of the loss of freedom made a deeper impression. Emmy's own face as she talked grew tense and sharpened, the top lip seemed on the verge of lifting a little upon one side to show the teeth in a snarl; while Roy's expression was one of affront, like that of a child when shown something ugly. A ground of sincerity had been reached.

After that they went on to drag up to the bar of judgment every participant in the 'swindle' of the cottage, using their teeth, tearing and rending – for here they were enjoying the rogue's luxury of castigating moral blemish in the virtuous.

So of course it was now Hungerford's turn; and if in his case a tacit agreement to guard their speech was made and roughly kept to, out of consideration for Simon and what he might understand, no forbearance beyond this was practised. Now they were at the heart of the evil, now they had uncovered the wanton stroke of treachery, the cause of that sudden fatal exacerbation of the morbid state which peace of mind and happiness and good fortune would have dissipated. For if Clem had had a peaceful, cared-for life, if only, even at the end, a little comfort instead of fright, worry, shock – (But she dropped the finger pointing to Hungerford, for she heard herself raging in the past, 'Why not pull yourself together? How dreadful you optimists are when you *do* collapse!')

They were still at it. Well, they could only be called her sympathisers. And a sense of this had for a time warmed her. Yet she cooled as she listened. An exaggeration and caricature of views held by herself, passions of her own carried to gross excess, could at last only act to open her eyes to an alarming unbalance and injustice in her own attitude; to how distorted her sick view had been of people who were perhaps only human and beset by difficulties.

But to argue with her company would have been useless. Its conclusion was inevitable, a simple belief in the simplest and basest motive possible. As for Hungerford, he had received 'a good rake-off' for a dishonest report on the cottage. And if Catherine had objected that so petty a haul could never have tempted him, they would have known better. She should have spoken to those who had will and capacity for such a deed themselves, who were acquainted with human meanness in their own hearts. For money, for the most pitiful sums, people would do anything. And the trick was handled with a glib comprehension, the ways of the swindler unmasked by the slick hands of experts with a candour which was almost naïve.

She observed this. Then from the satisfaction which had warmed her there began a quick decline, which speedily turned it to revulsion.

She pushed back her chair. This exhibition of moral indignation from which the springs of righteousness were quite lacking, suddenly gave her, as nothing else had done, an impression of viciousness, abruptly exposing to her the blackguardism of her company.

With a sensation of great weakness, she became conscious of herself sitting in their midst, vaguely smiling, and of Clem's name vainly tossed about.

And there, straight before her, was Simon, his soft, thick little mouth red with a sultry thirst, hanging jealously on to Emmy.

A DISTURBING circumstance had long been clamouring for her attention. It was the behaviour of Simon. To begin with, when they had attempted to seat him apart from Emmy, there had been a terrible outcry. Settled according to his wishes, he was still agitated; he was rude and out-of-hand. Certainly the conduct of the young men set him no good example. Besides, they teased him, carelessly, with injudicious roughness, working him up, exciting him more and more. He began to boast – he could not boast fast enough, and his inventions were of the wildest.

This amused his audience, and in the intervals of their own discussion they idly egged him on.

'So you're a gunman, are you, sonny?'

'Yes,' cried Simon, stammering in his haste and with his lip rampant, 'I'm a gunman – I'm a very good gunman! – a dreadful gunman!'

'Your pop must be proud of you.'

And Simon's uncontrolled treble rose again. 'Yes, I am, I hit our baby – I hit him on the head with the bottle. Yes, I took the old baby and put him under the summer-house where we stayed, and I stuffed him in and

I tied the shawl over his mouth. When they aren't looking, I hit him!'

'Why, I say, you aren't a gunman, you're a cosh-boy.' The young men quizzed the little fellow waggishly, while Emmy, catching Catherine's eye, raised her brows and jerked her head in the child's direction, as much as to say, 'There, what did I tell you? And what can you expect?'

'Yes,' shrilled Simon, beside himself. 'Yes, I'm a cosh-boy, too!'

Catherine looked on with a slight, fixed, uneasy smile by which she unconsciously sought to hide her feelings from the others. But she was no longer listening. She had suddenly remembered Olive Hungerford's face looking down at the little boy with fear and repugnance. She had had several kind and conscientious letters from the young woman since Simon had come to her, with enclosures for the child, and all his belongings had shown evidences of a delicate care. It was impossible to see Olive Hungerford as the unscrupulous stepmother. Had the child done something really hurtful, then? Perhaps he had pinched or smacked the baby, or merely showed ill-will towards it – a little boy of deeply jealous and markedly sensuous nature, who had been an only child, indulged and adored, then pushed aside – a child with temper spoiled by jealousy, a little savage at heart, like all children. It would be enough to make a fond young mother, feeling that her darling was menaced, afraid of the little desperado, wild to get rid of him. The shade of pathos she had discovered in the young woman now seemed explained. She had felt herself, no doubt, in a dreadful dilemma. Perhaps she had never dared to tell the doting father quite all that had happened? So Catherine pondered over this, preoccupied.

But she was sharply recalled. The business had gone from bad to worse. At last Simon's true condition had caught their

eye, they perceived that he had 'a mash on Emmy', and this, making a genuine appeal to their humour, had caused them to drop their own subject and turn their full attention on the child. Now what was the frantic anxiety of Simon to do himself justice! He strained every nerve to make a display. There was no longer any mistaking the fact – the little boy was trying with all his might to stand up to the men, to hold his own with them, to crow against them, against Greg who had called Emmy his girl, or Roy who paddled with Emmy's hand now and again or tickled her; and this circumstance pepped up the whole thing for the young men, turning an insipid game with a child into a real bit of sport, which included Emmy.

Simon had no chance from that moment. His speech grew throaty and hampered as he strove to speak like a man. He could not find words and then he struck out at Roy or Greg with his fists. His very features seemed to change. The curious primitive cast of his little head became more pronounced as he thrust out his thick lips, which looked almost to be swollen, making the lower half of his face project more than usual; while the hot flush on his sunburned skin had the effect of darkening it. He was transformed, he was ugly; and this was so marked that suddenly Catherine was aware of Greg speaking aside to her, and urging her, 'Why, look at that kid – what a funny thing! Touch of the tar-brush, plain as Jane, isn't it?'

But she thought it was more, horribly more, like watching one possessed and speaking by the evil spirit within him.

Still she made no move. Every instinct cried out to one to hide, in pity, the helpless exposure. But a kind of doubt as to the nature of what was happening, a kind of timid and inexperienced disbelief, perhaps held her back; and perhaps there was not wanting some remote strain of dark and cruel

curiosity. But she had not forgotten the feeling and anxious face of Hungerford as he had requested her, 'You won't let him go too near the stream? It's deep.'

Yes, deep. Not deep enough. How simple to trust someone you have injured so! And the moral languor overcame her, the paralysis of deep damage.

It was Emmy who brought the scene to a close. She suddenly lost patience with a tiresome child and administered a rough scolding. 'You wicked little devil! I won't have anything more to do with you. No, get off, I don't love you in the least. No, not one bit. Give me my two boys in London. Well, now I *shall* send for them. You never touched the poor baby – I don't believe you. No, that's enough – hands off!'

Hearing these fearful words from Emmy, Simon stopped dead; and for a moment they had a view of a poor little blank and frightened face in their midst. Then came the natural climax to all this orgy of emotion – a paroxysm of weeping. Sobs burst from his chest, he wrung his hands, but he did not cry aloud, there was no uproar, he did not blubber or howl; only said brokenly between heaving sobs that it was a bad baby – he had only wanted to make it go away! '*I wanted to make him go away!*' And with weeping face blindly lifted to Emmy, he begged, softly supplicating, 'Emmy, make everyone *go away!* Make them *go away*, Emmy!' He had no other means of expressing his untimely desire for Emmy, born of his great need to have someone of his own, someone constant, so that a mother's face might turn on him again, but this monotonous cry demanding that everyone else should go away from her. Perhaps he did not see anything in the world between Emmy and a great, hopeless abandonment. Utterly oblivious of his status as a dreadful gunman, he sat there with the fantastic grimace of the

infant weeper which, big boy though he was, he did not even try to hide. Would no one have pity?

Catherine, in the midst of this terrible scene, got to her feet, imagining people approaching to turn them out, and was thankful to find herself backed by Emmy. Simon now howled, and so their exit was made in a glare of publicity, the young men adding very unnecessarily to the commotion with their loud, jocular voices. Emmy was crosser than anyone had ever seen her.

She was cross with her brother, too, whom she loudly declared to have shown 'bad manners' in giving them the slip. In short, a touch of anxiety was now perceptible in Emmy – but it was not for Simon, whom she pushed roughly before her and who provided excuse enough to hasten home.

'There, it's always the way with Greg,' she said as they went on, having taken leave of the young men. 'He means well, but lay off the drink, no, he can't. I wouldn't go with a man who soaks, and so I've let him know. As for that Roy, he's a rat. They aren't either of them any use to me, those two. . . . I'm real sorry Ferdy wasn't with us. Ferdy's a good-looker – only that he's lost an eye, as I told you. He's tall, aristocratic. Gentlemanly, Ferdy is – looks it, anyway – for that's a word I don't see why you shouldn't use. You wouldn't have had to be ashamed of Ferdy. . . . And did you spot Mrs S. sitting and looking at us like a hanging judge? Well, she was. I gave her a slight wave, but she passed me up, for some reason.

'What I say is, it's all the fault of *this* –' and she gave Simon a vicious push. Then she related a displeasing tale of infant precocity which had come her way. Simon clung to her hand.

'Are you going to take that job?' Catherine asked calmly.

BUT having received sundry dramatic and remorseful looks across the restaurant table, Catherine had said to herself, 'I have lost her.'

However, during the afternoon, Emmy was declaring she would not leave her for the world. This was on her coming in, thoughtful, from an errand into the town.

Later, at dusk, she made another expedition.

Emmy turned off from the high street into a steep lane which ran down between lofty, dank walls and tumble-down cottages, and finally led up to the station. In the hollow it crossed the stream at a point where it issued from the mill-ponds, and it was there, in that inauspicious spot, that she came upon a tall man leaning on the parapet under the willows. It was as if he had drifted into the depths naturally.

Ferdy had been thinking all day, and it had done him no good.

Perhaps because he vaguely felt the unbalance in himself, he had been thrown into a fit of gloom by the story of the sisters' tragedy as told by Emmy when she had met their party in the town during the morning. He had fallen into one of his moods. This was his reason for cutting the lunch-

party at the Unicorn. He had gone gloomily to feed in some little pull-up, and then, not unaware that his appearance in that countrified town was rather conspicuous, had taken to the country. He had come upon some new building which was going on in the valley and had hovered within sight of it for some while, attempting to cull a little more information about house property in the district without attracting attention to himself. Housing was not in his line of business, so no more likely role than that of a prospective buyer was open to him, and upon that he did not venture. He did not look like a householder. His appearance was always hampering, which was hard. Later he had called at the agreed rendezvous, to find that he had missed Emmy. Here he had listened to Greg's earnest persuasions but refused to go back to town with his friends. He wanted a private word with his sister. They told him that Emmy would be found walking down the lane to the station at a certain hour in the evening. Ferdy again took shyly to the byways, drifted about the leafy lanes with certain plans taking shape in his mind, and at dusk was down by the mill, leaning on the parapet, his hat over his dead eye. His thoughts were dark.

It made him feel queer to hear of people being put away, queer and sympathetic. Perhaps innocent as a babe – yes, sick only – taken helplessly. But he did not make much distinction between the various ways in which it might come about that one was shut up, or put inside. Bolts and bars; it was the thought of these which caused fear to jab so dangerously at the back of his insecure brain. The obscurity under the trees, the air full of the tumbling and splashing of the water, cut him off from the noises of surrounding life, cut off his thoughts in a world of their own, and fitly. These thoughts would have astonished any inhabitant of that quiet spot, just as his face, air and general cut had caused passing

surprise to a few observant people. Ferdy's clothes were good and unspectacular; that was not the trouble. But there was strangeness, there was failure at a certain level. And it was the same with his thoughts. Not that they were the thoughts of a wolf among sheep – rather they were the thoughts of a sheep among wolves, which, being among wolves, was obliged to go armed. A strayed sheep, too, such as the Lord loves.

He was a sympathetic man, he was a man capable of pity. Or at least he was capable of that spirit in which the poor help the poor, with the idea that they themselves will need help one day, acting half in superstition, acting for luck; that is, making a superstitious attempt to avert evil from themselves.

There it was (whatever it was); some motive in Ferdy which transcended the hope of gain, and yet, miraculously, did not preclude it. Ferdy liked a good motive and nearly always worked from one.

Emmy came up to her brother in the shadow and began by crying firmly over the gushing and splashing, 'As it happens, I'm pulling out of it, so don't count me in.' But her pause, after she had said this, was dubious. Ferdy had made no response. The water racketed on in their ears. She could not make up her mind whether it would be better for her to go or stay at the cottage; and this from a consideration quite apart from her own interests. There was no question, now, of drawing off the scent by going; truly she was afraid, though in a carefully unformulated way, of what her brother might compel her to do if she remained. For she knew what she was like with Ferdy; she was weak.

'Well, I've enjoyed my stay here,' she said, perhaps dimly hoping to make virtue sound enticing, or at least to encourage herself in good ways. 'I'll say that. And I feel the better

for it.' She had drawn close to him so that there was no need to shout. Thus she got Ferdy's voice, slow and mild, sounding rather kindly, right in her ear. Still, it was doubtful if anyone not used to him could have made out anything but the gist of what he said. To Emmy it conveyed this meaning: 'Ah, I'm glad you've enjoyed yourself.'

'Yes, so am I. And I've enjoyed the high principles.'

'I like my sister to be high-principled.'

Emmy improvingly retailed the many austerities she had found practised at the cottage. 'Never a bottle in the house. Strict truth in season and out of season. Clean sheets every week, and towels the same, and as little to eat as any soul could exist on, and that you could eat off the floor, supposing you should wish to. But, mind you, I like it, I respect it -'

'With the help of the Unicorn.'

'Well,' said Emmy more tolerantly, 'there's no harm in eating. It isn't that. Though there's the look of it. . . . When I remember what I felt like, getting out of the train, and, if you'll believe it, even snow laying around, not swept up -'

'Lying, lying.'

'Lying, by all means, if you prefer it - and I dare say you do. But it only shows you not to be prejudiced, for I've got on fine. I was like an old-time milkmaid inside of a month. Rosy! Simple!'

'She's a bad sight, I presume?'

'Yes and no. Well, she's got what I call a very charming smile. Yes, I should describe her as having a really wonderful smile which changes her face utterly!' Emmy cried, suddenly bringing about this total change in Catherine's looks, since nothing less than that could really mend matters. 'Only she doesn't lay it on often enough. And a nice laugh, too. But ditto there. However, she's better than when I first came. I feel I've done a stroke of work on her. I feel proud of her now - like

you do of a kid you've pulled through an illness. I wouldn't like her to go back. . . . Of course, it's no good really. She's eating her heart out. And all the while, not a word to me. I *feel* that. When, after all, all the neighbours were in on the show from the word go. I heard it all from Mrs S. to the last detail.'

'Should you call her a good woman?'

'Why, she's an angel!' Emmy cried, with dramatic sense catching fire.

'Right. Doesn't go to church, by any chance?'

'Ah, *well* - no!'

'Well, you can't have everything.'

'Innocent as a child. No, worse, for there's plenty she doesn't know that any spry child does. Yet you'd be mistaken to think her really missing, like I rather inclined to at first. But not afterwards. Because there's deeper sorts of things than never having seen the inside of a bar. There's feelings -.' But here Emmy herself could but feel. She turned to what was more readily expressed. 'I wouldn't for anything get anyone into drinking ways, but a glass of the good poison now and again would brighten her outlook. It's a *sad* outlook.' Then she was reminded of other instances of Catherine's oddity and related them.

After listening with head bent to her, Ferdy gloomily made known his opinion that the woman was already border-line.

At this, Emmy ceased talking, with an effect of sudden thought. 'I don't like to picture her putting herself out,' she said after a moment. 'But so she will, that's my belief, as soon as she's alone again. Though Mrs S. has promised to keep an eye on her - not that Mrs S. cares really, but thinks it's up to her to prevent anyone getting off in peace. Was the best I could do. Or the worst - I don't know! . . . I don't like to think of it. . . . It's funny, because they're both

getting on, the sisters, I mean' – Emmy spoke not scathingly but with plain realism – 'and what did she expect, then, you wonder? Something pretty bad's bound to happen to all of us in the end.'

'Not necessarily. You can go quickly.'

'Well, good luck to her!' cried Emmy, like one who does not wish to hear what she has heard. 'I've done my good neighbour act and enjoyed it. I'm sorry to be skipping. Nor do I like this idea of the daily grind I'm letting myself in for. Besides which, I shan't feel as good as this up among the boys. Yes, it's true, doing the right thing by your neighbours makes you feel good.'

'Quite right, Emmy. I'm glad you've got such principles. Do unto others.'

Both were then silent. It was a silence full of discomfort of various kinds. The noise of the fall, the writhing tresses of the black water gulped away under the bridge, the wreaths of lacy foam scumming the surface, equivocal in the dark, horridly suggesting something disintegrated from long immersion, the dank smell, the slimy, leprous brickwork, the participating whispers of the leaves all round them, the feeling of being too much in the open – all could only strike these urban spirits as undesirable.

'What's the matter with the station, then?' asked Emmy plaintively. 'Seats there, and all. Didn't they tell you the station? You and your charnel-house tastes.'

This brought no answer.

'For God's sake,' she said, her nerve going, 'say what you want. I can't think what you're cooking up. It was only a passing fancy. Don't you know a gold brick when you see it? Most likely she hasn't given it another thought. And, anyway, there she is. And will live to be ninety.'

There was further silence.

'Wouldn't she be better off in heaven?' said Ferdy at last in a slow, deep voice. Several witty answers suggested themselves, but Emmy's gift for backchat suddenly deserted her.

'Now, if you'd said the sister would –'

'The sister, too. I meant the sister.'

'Look here, why fidget?' Emmy asked placatingly and in a helpless manner. 'One – I've been told in so many words, by one who knows, that the sister won't last long. Two – see what my poor friend herself is like, and how much chance *she's* got –'

The woman wouldn't get much further, Ferdy observed in his hoarse murmur, before she was picked up by the hospital herself, by the sound of it. And what then? What then, eh? No doing herself in *then!* They'd keep her alive for ever. That was what those places were for – to keep them alive for ever. 'To hell with your Mrs S. – to hell with her, I say, interfering bitch,' he was heard to be concluding in his mild, muted tones. 'She'll be the one to hand her in, that one will.'

'No, no, Ferdy, she'll do it of herself,' Emmy said, frightened, not answering his words. 'You don't want to do anything –'

Ferdy intimated that she had misunderstood him; he said this with calm, kindly contempt, like one who was well used to being misunderstood. He was a merciful man, he said. Merciful. And it was the truth.

'Good God, can't you see that, ten to one, she hasn't given the damn will another thought?' Emmy burst out in sudden shrillness. But she could not keep that up with Ferdy, as she well knew, and she relapsed weakly; said the gnats were getting her and that she was going home.

A restraining hand on her arm, a hard-gripping hand which seemed inclined to twist, delayed her for a moment.

'It is your business,' Ferdy explained with a sudden clarity

and with a surprisingly educated accent, 'to see that she *does* give it another thought. To see that she *does*. That's all. Nothing more.'

Emmy came home, and later in the evening announced that she was going to London 'for a few days'. 'So you're going, Emmy?' Catherine said quietly, calling up a smile. And the girl admitted it. 'You see, I've got to think of my two little fellows – and the rest you know of. But I won't tell Sambo, or you'll have trouble with him. Tell him I'm blowing back in a day or two.'

After that, they had a little rather restrained and pondered talk, sitting by the window late and looking out into the moonlit garden, Emmy's mood being unusually low-keyed.

'And, look, dear, supposing you've by any chance made that will you spoke of, what I wish you'd do is to make another and leave me out of it, for, look, here I am, on the up and up, and your relatives ought to have any money that's going, it may not be much, but everyone can do with a bit more money.'

If Emmy meant this, the speech was heroic. If she merely wished to sound Catherine as to what she had done, it was perfectly successful. But the two motives could exist together.

Catherine replied, absently, 'Oh, yes, I've made it. No, Emmy, I'll leave it as it is.'

Emmy's spirits did not improve.

But by the morning things were decidedly better.

'Well, we'll see each other ever so often, I'll always be running down –' and the usual unconsidered things were said on the subject. 'Never shall I forget my happy, happy days here! Only I may not be able to get away just at first, for it isn't the kind of job I can do on my head. So, just at first – you'll understand, won't you, if just at first –'

Then down came the whole gimcrack edifice of Emmy's sojourning. A few links with her surroundings had been so lightly forged that they broke at a touch. One respectable case of solid proportions containing her wardrobe was packed and left to be called for; and then that collection of trifles which accumulates round even the lightest traveller during a six months' visit was dispersed and cast to the winds without benefit of second thoughts; anything her sinewy little arms were found unable to carry at the last moment was thrust into fire or dustbin; and by the afternoon, with a terrible speediness which had had a numbing effect on both Catherine and Simon, there stood Emmy at the door, dressed for London. They had decided there should be no parting at the station, for fear of a scene with Simon. So, with many cries of 'Happy days!' 'See you again ever so soon!' and the like, she was off down the road, a little lively figure which often turned to wave or gesture humorously. The wind seemed to blow this little figure along like a piece of carnival flotsam, like a bit of spangled paper off a sweet – and Catherine thought, 'I shall never see her again.'

NOW a great harvest moon blazed all night, whitening with its singing rays and making visible a landscape which was not a shadowy replica of the day, but something different, subtly uncharted, giving rise to thoughts of haunts and dreams.

'The garden of sleep'. She remembered the old, banal song, probably revived for popular listening, which Emmy had caught up and often sung for Simon; and the moonstruck valley returned echoes of the coarse, strong voice, mockingly sweetened to match the sentimental air. 'Waiting for thee - in the garden of sleep.' That was all she remembered of it, and perhaps remembered wrong; those words, reiterated cloyingly in the drowsing brain.

Eloquent nights, they made one wakeful; even the child felt it, was restless and cried out. Once she saw his sleeping face with a beam of moonlight across it, and drew the curtain closer, thinking vaguely of old superstitions, near to magic, and lunar influences, accounted baleful.

In the morning, the orb was still there; thin gold, standing in the west over the valley filled with mist which rose like thick steam and rolled off the water, while the half-sub-

merged trees, touched by the sun, seemed to have put on overnight the rusty and yellowing livery of autumn. Later in the day they might still descry it, worn to a rim of silver.

Catherine felt dazed from lack of sleep, or perhaps like one deprived of a drug, wrecked and all to pieces.

At first she had been diverted from her own troubles by Simon, who had wept and howled and conducted himself in a manner which was not only intolerable but threw her into alarm, for she feared he would make himself ill. But that had passed after a few hours. Shrewdly, with her natural realism, Emmy had judged that a day or so would suffice to take the edge off the little boy's grief; and to Catherine's surprise, so it happened. But then Simon still went under the belief that Emmy was coming back, and quite shortly. The girl had once or twice gone to London for a day or so at a time, so that he had grown accustomed to the idea of lacking Emmy for a few days, if not resigned to it; and the fact was that he took this occasion to be like the others. He calmed down, but of course twelve hours had not passed before he was asking, 'Will it be tomorrow, d'you suppose?' She was obliged to say, 'Not tomorrow.' He fretted a little and was inclined to weep. But he was good and quiet, subdued by his griefs. 'Tomorrow?'

She felt they had done very unwisely in not telling him the truth, that Emmy's temporization was going to make trouble later; but she hoped it might tide her over till the child went.

That could not be long now. She had heard from Margaret Forrester that Hungerford was to be back from the north in the following week, when he and his family were to move into their new house on the Surrey hills. And she would be heartily thankful when the child was sent for. She wished him gone, for his going would remove a new anxiety. She

saw that she did not talk to him enough, and that this was not good for him. Yet the days passed in a state of amity. They jogged along together in quaint semblance of an ancient pair who understood each other with few words. Under her unexciting rule, he was tractable as never before – only was he now too quiet? He was, of course, much too quiet, a child not quiet by nature.

He still spent long hours in the garden, in solitude now, and she would sometimes see him leaning against a tree, or sitting with face cupped in his hands in an adult attitude of thought, for a length of time which struck her; it seemed to her a stillness unnaturally prolonged. But then, while she looked and grew anxious, he would begin jumping about, gesturing, talking to himself, like any solitary child at play.

Closer to him now than she had ever been, she considered him as she had not done before. It had always been plain to her that there were less intelligible sides to his character. She had seen that he was abnormally responsive to sensuous impressions. He would stand gazing at some object which had taken his fancy, or perhaps some patch of colour with sunlight playing on it, till he appeared almost stupefied. He loved to handle Emmy's pretty things, to stroke the silky or velvet surfaces of which certain of Emmy's clothes were made, to nuzzle in them; to jump back on the unmade bed and roll there; a little fellow who liked to bask in warmth, on softness, a little lotus-eater. And without knowing much about it, she had felt all this to be rather unusual in a boy of his age, but had taken it to be due to the artistic strain of which Margaret Forrester had spoken. Now she thought more of it.

All the summer, he had been 'running wild'; an exercise which in the old days had been held to strengthen children. He seemed well, he was brown as a nut. Yet his appetite was

often fastidious – but they had put that down to the hot weather. All the summer he had been tumbling and basking in that miniature jungle, with his blood heated by the fervid sun – some strain in it perhaps responding with an untold ecstasy to the tropical intemperance; handling nature's play-things, obsessed by the strange, fascinating forms, noxious and gorgeous, which the spot produced; dabbling in its pools and puddles and weltering ditches; seeing the tiger-eyes of the hunting cats crouched in the grass, the shimmering demoiselles and the great, globe-eyed dragonflies darting on their prey, the birds coupling, the fecund life of the channels; learning nothing but the lessons of his senses, with senses all richly assailed and none to forbid animal joy. What life could have been more 'natural'?

But none could recognize better than herself its artificiality. Wrapped in his own game, lacking child companions, with everything about him of the wrong size and too much heightened for him, he had been inhabiting a charged, adult world, and that world had its criminal, perilous mystery with which he had made ignorant play. Blind love. The little hero of a dream tale – or was it a crime story?

Now it was an earth of decrescent joys, a shiver struck through the warm blood. Although the days were still hot, there was not that constant blandness in their rise and decline. The mornings were sharp, there was an icy dew, cobwebs like grey rags draped the bushes, falling in heavy swags, torn by their load of moisture; the smooth leaves glistened and the hairy and rough leaves exuded a grey sweat; icy drops and tricklings made the garden unwelcoming for hours after the sun was up, and he was called in long before dark because of the falling chill. Then there was no one but herself for him. She thought his quietness had some part of bewilderment.

Once she looked into the garden-room and saw him in a chair before the table, his arms flung out over the table-top and his head laid on them; the attitude of one abandoned to grief. She lifted him up, his head hung down, he would not look at her; but he was not crying.

'Simon, what's the matter with you? Are you sleepy?'

He did not answer, but presently sat up and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. She saw that he had not been posing. She supposed that he had really been half asleep. He had been playing in the hot garden all the morning, and one could account for it like that.

But it could not be said that she thought no more of it. She had looked at those mute lips, and the room – the same room! – had rung with silence.

Another time, she said to him, after long hesitation, as they ate their meal, she with a book beside her, 'What game do you play down the garden, Simon?' And she took a look at his face while he was unconscious of her scrutiny. His long eyes wandered aside with an ineffable expression of sleep.

She said no more. She had a profound unwillingness to probe further.

In the morning, the postman put two letters through the door and Simon jumped down from the breakfast table and pounced on one of them with a shout of triumph. He had a card from Emmy which pleased him mightily and made him laugh, and before Catherine could be allowed to look at her own letter this had to be deciphered and admired. The card was a highly coloured one, and at the first moment she felt surprise and distaste at Emmy's choice of a hunting-scene. But on looking at it more attentively she saw what it was which had made Simon laugh so; on three of the foremost of that pack of horribe curs Emmy had bestowed wings. And what on earth did Emmy mean by that? Oh, she saw, but

was hardly willing to see. She remembered a casual reference to a Greek drama being produced in London at that moment. So there ran old Foxy, about to be torn by the Furies. After all, it was a joke intended only for herself, and she was acclimatized to Emmy's humour. The written message was in a different style: 'Dear Simon, who'd believe it? I was down in the garden last night! Love from Emmy. Love, love from your own Emmy. Think of me, Simon, think of me.'

'Bad girl,' she said to herself, scolding her in her mind, not realizing the quality of that indulgence which made her smile as she did so. Then she explained carefully to the little boy that Emmy only meant she had dreamed of the garden.

Well, fortunately feeling could not be kept alive in a child of that age simply by messages, written words; the presence gone, the emotion raised by it must quickly fade.

With the usual apprehension, she picked up her own letter, not knowing the writing.

It was a very brief one, the gist of it contained in a single statement: 'The car will call at two o'clock. Will you please be so good as to have Simon ready?' It enclosed a cheque, settling accounts with her. A polite, cold letter from Hungerford himself, saying that the child's visit must terminate, giving no reasons for the short notice, not pretending to consult her convenience, making no attempt to soften its directions with any graceful acknowledgement of what she had done for the little boy. Simon was to be removed from her care, that was all.

If the demand had been anticipated, yet the manner of it was unexpected. 'You're squashing up your letter,' cried Simon, exploding with laughter, the card from Emmy having excited him; and so she was – squashing up her letter, cheque and all.

He remained in high, noisy spirits, restless, weeping easily.

In the late afternoon, she having spent the day over Simon's clothes, they walked in the woods and she pondered how to prepare the child for this fresh uprooting.

Bronzed and dark, with leaves already falling, with grass no longer verdant after the parched summer, with the black brand of fire in open places, the woods seemed dull and spent, coming swiftly to ruin. But it was warm still where there was shelter and she sat down on a fallen trunk at the foot of a long, wooded hill, while Simon ran and climbed and rooted, and dabbled himself with blackberries; and with her eyes following his little figure, but hardly seeing him, she speculated upon what had happened. She had now had time to reflect that if a fond father could be imagined to have heard of that unfortunate luncheon party at the Unicorn, then the letter was comprehensible enough; she could hardly wonder if anyone cherishing the child had taken fright. The matter passed from her thoughts, it fell into insignificance. Hungerford and his affairs dropped into insignificance.

For she was face to face with her own abandonment. Could she pretend to be fond of Simon, that she felt this added heaviness? Whether it was so or not, the thought of his going somehow lessened the daylight. The end of the frivolities! The jollification turned to ashes, or collapsed into starveling misery like the falsehood it was, after serving to corrupt her still more deeply – perhaps that was all; and no doubt other diversions would be forced upon her, even more beguiling, even more damning.

But only while there were sporting and laughter and busy, flighty comings and goings did that house cease to give out crazing echoes.

She entered upon a long, gloomy reverie. The metallic glinting of the leaves in the sunlight on the opposite slope wearied her eyes, and she leaned her forehead on her hand,

shielding them. Words came from some forgotten source. 'The Lord casts no one into hell, but evil spirits cast themselves in.' A blankness followed; no great feeling. Her thoughts seemed gradually to sink in a dark spiral, down and down, into depth upon depth of evil done.

She shuddered at last and, raising her eyes, found that the shade had crept over her, while the trees up the hill were standing in a blaze of dull gold, their rusty leaves of the end of summer fired to this colouring. A mass of stormy, fiery clouds had gathered round the sunset, and from this the thick light poured. But the great bank of purple cloud behind the trees, flushed and gilded, warmed and deepened to a hue that defied definition, was so much darker that the source of light seemed reversed, and such effects are always sombre.

She rose and walked vaguely.

Simon ran up. 'Oh, Miss Hare, I've thought of something beautiful! Do let us go to Aldershot and get an ice there and see the soldiers – like I did with Emmy. Here we can't get any ices, the shops are shut. A wood is all very nice, I like it, but all the same you can't say it has anywhere to get ices. Gosh, I, could eat an ice now!'

'Why, Simon, look at your coat, and I haven't time to get it cleaned.'

Simon was indifferent. 'Oh, Miss Hare, do let's go home quickly, quickly, at once, because Emmy may have come while we've been out!' And Simon's treble piped on and on, at full pitch, until, terribly weary in the head, she was constrained to say, 'Hush, Simon – how loudly you speak. Don't you hear how loud it sounds in this quiet place?'

'But the robins,' argued Simon, astonished, 'are making a fearful noise all the time, much more noise than I am, and yet you say, how beautiful! . . . Miss Hare, why do you walk like this?' and Simon went with his head drooping.

They continued on their homeward path, somewhat erratically, climbing vigorously for a few minutes, then pausing. Simon for wayside attractions or for argument, she from absence of mind, with Simon time and again rather scornfully setting her right about the direction.

'But supposing, now, we go to London? Oh, yes, do let's go, tomorrow, all the way up to London – for there we could see Emmy! I have her address, you know, there it is on my card, in that little round by the stamp –' And thus he went on building up his plans and, getting excited, rousing the echoes with his strong, shrill voice.

She at last came to a halt and spoke tentatively. 'But you know you'll be going home very soon now. You're a lucky boy, you've got a lovely new home, I hear. And then think how glad your father will be to have you home again.'

'Going home?' said Simon in a voice so astonished and confounded, so sharp with apprehension, that she was shocked at her tactlessness, vividly realizing of a sudden how vast a landscape that summer must appear to the little boy, the farther side of it hardly in view to the near-sighted eyes of childhood. She thought the word, used like that, had not really conveyed anything to him but a kind of threat – for was he not going home at that moment?

'Going, I mean, to your own home, where your father is.'

'Oh, bother – bother them!' he cried, losing his temper. 'Why can't they give me to you? – I don't see why they can't! Do ask them, Miss Hare, to give me to you! They've got that old baby!' This was vigorous language, but the squaring mouth, the round, frightened eyes, did not go with it. Simon cast himself upon her.

'Yes, bother, bother, indeed!' she said; but she summoned up patience, made an effort, and began to draw rosy pictures of the home he was going to. And to please him, she added,

'It's not so very far away from here, either, it won't seem any distance when you go by car.'

'No!' cried Simon, with a wild turn of the eye and stamping about passionately. 'No, no, no! I won't go. I'll hide.'

'But what an unkind boy you are, not to want to go back to your own father,' she said, feeling her head throbbing and all this too much of a strain on something within her, some resource almost exhausted. 'Think how that would grieve him.'

Simon cried with wailing, breaking voice, 'Oh, no, *he's* all right, he likes that old baby!'

'But that's quite wrong – I'm sure he loves you best. He loves you very dearly.'

'You love me!' said Simon weepily; and then, with incomparably more feeling, 'Emmy loves me! Emmy loves me!'

'Of course, of course she does,' she answered, stroking his head, unable to say otherwise. 'Yes, I love you,' and she knelt and took the little boy in her arms, seeing that he had collapsed into a weak, helpless mood and was wanting to be comforted.

But she felt perplexed how to deal with him. An offer of brandy snaps for supper had an unexpectedly good effect, better than any argument she could devise at the moment. She pitied him, the little boy who was already so far astray; but it was an exhausted, barren pity in which there was no help.

SIMON was gone, and she forgot about him, and all else, for just at that time Clem died. Without further suffering, she fell dead.

But fifteen years had been the minimum sentence on which Catherine's mind had dwelt, the rock on which it had struck and fixed, and lay grinding; fifteen years, as if she had heard it pronounced by some infallible authority; and this although she had known, far better than any of those who had presumed to instruct her, that in Clem the disease was raging on another course.

She had seen Clem laid on the bed; she herself had had to deal with all the affairs of death, she had written the letters, held business communications, and was facing the many ugly material facts of her own position which had resulted. But a few weeks later there came the lull which falls when the last of the letters has been answered and the legal proceedings have dropped off into the usual long slumber.

And then, in this threatening silence, a heavy perturbation, a sense of things done and kept out of her sight, took possession of her.

She looked back, and the grave seemed like a dream, the

flowers pearled all over with the misty rain, the reiterated words, 'in loving memory', crying achingly from the white cards, the shadowy mourners – all seemed like a crafty dream. Someone had held her arm – Margaret Forrester. Now she knew why Margaret was weeping so bitterly. Not for Clem's death. For no friend would weep for the death of the mad, no friend would mourn them.

So she woke one morning to the memory of the cuckoo's voice, in a sombre state of dual-mindedness, knowing all this, knowing of the grave, yet filled with a monstrous suspicion that Clem had been seized again and these ceremonies and legal-seeming transactions were all part of a plot – a plot to remove Clem from her, to take her out of her hands for ever and return her to that place.

It began again. But now the journeys were made all by night, such was the new ruling: long, black journeys, with the low lights of the special bus turned down on a mourning crew. There was the well-known company, creatures, all of them, whom she had met before, years and years ago: the one with the bolting eyes of nervous disease, and those with the nervous tricks which made them socially impossible, and the jolly ones (ancient carnival masks brought out again in the sickly light), the ones who chattered and made a weekly outing of it, a club jaunt, an opportunity for sociability, who greeted old friends heartily and took a gossip's interest in new faces, and the beaten, apathetic ones, and those who sat grimly silent, eating out their hearts with rage, and the humble fool, quite sunk in imbecile resignation, who told you with a sort of meek pride that she had made that journey for *fifteen years*.

But, as she was not mad, she could rationalize no further. All through this strange aberration, the view, the figures in her thoughts, had seemed unsteady, as if faintly doubled. She had been conscious all through that her thoughts were part-

nered, delusion and reality standing side by side, with the doubt as to which was which growing always fainter. The night journeys ceased.

One day she went to look at the grave, which they said was Clem's, and stood gazing for some while at the raw patch in the trampled grass. Someone had laid a few flowers there, which the past rain had succoured. She did not touch anything, and came home full of unutterably heavy but sane thoughts. She had merely felt, what so many have felt, standing beside a grave, 'Safe. Freed.' But her feeling was dull, commonplace.

And why would the deep pain for Clem not abate?

To those flowers which had been brought belatedly to the grave there was a card attached bearing a name which she had last seen eighteen months ago, in connection with great bitterness; and later, when she was home, she thought of it again and after some search found a letter which she had received at that time, at the crisis of the tragedy, and had thrust away, never properly absorbed.

Now at last she read it with full attention.

It was from one called Irene, a friend of Clem's school-days and girlhood: a friendship which had fallen into a slow and natural decline through years of separation and through the usual divergence of interests in people long parted. So, at least, it had appeared to Clem, for so Catherine had heard her speak of it: as something vaguely saddening, but inevitable and no one's fault.

But the friend, it seemed, perhaps from long brooding, had come to other conclusions.

At the darkest hour, as if a further turn of the screw had been thought necessary, this long and cruel letter had been dropped through the door; and Catherine would always remember standing there, laboriously trying to absorb the sense

of it, and then turning and tremulously attempting, again and again, to tuck the letter away in some crevice among the pigeon-holes where there was manifestly no room for it, and at last thrusting it away somewhere, anywhere, so that it was out of her sight.

'I'm not writing you a letter of condolence, Catherine, not writing to give you comfort -'

It accused her, of course, it was the old accusation over again, the sentence upon her secretly pronounced by all Clem's friends and now put into harsh words, an explicit charge that she had ruined Clem's life: that she had separated her from her friends, that by refusing to meet these friends, whom she could not endure, she had forced Clem to shut the door to them; that in her neurotic restlessness she had driven the clinging, home-loving Clem from one spot to another, from one cold, strange place to another, so that her contacts had become progressively shallower and she had at last lost the power of putting down roots at all; until finally - 'It was for you, it was for your sake, it was at your instigation, that she at last in despair buried herself where you are now.

'She was my great friend, my friend from childhood,' the letter hysterically cried at this point. 'She was my first love. It was a sound, happy friendship which should have endured all our lives, but you separated us, you separated us, the friendship was wrecked by you, like all her friendships - you, who have never had a friend yourself - and no more devastating comment on your character can be made than to say you never had a friend. Oh, but, yes, you had one. You had Clem. She was the unhappy exception. And to her you clung, like the poisonous ivy, and fastened on her for good and all - a life-sentence for her. And she all the while smothering secret terror lest you should go the way of your mother, and for that reason, not because she loved you, pampering you

with that pathetic folly, lost to common sense! You precious creature, do you flatter yourself she loved you? Do you call that love which is nothing but duty and pity, yes, and fear? Many, many times we told her that she must shake you off, but she fell into a weak fright at the bare thought of it, so enslaved to you she was, and she struggled on under her cross and burden, picking every stone out of your path. Now you have lost her, you have lost your prop and stay – and I don't offer you condolences, Catherine, for you always wished to be alone and now you are alone.'

The charge, then, was no light one, nothing less than murder. Clem had collapsed at last under the merciless neighbouring jar and grind of Catherine's personality.

But, Irene, a sick personality!

Oh, she could have answered the charge, if it had mattered now. She could have said that Irene had forgotten one thing in her long diatribe so given over to condemnation – that an insurmountable dread of one's fellow-beings and a helpless inability to make contact with them do not afflict a mind in health. She could have pointed to the apparition of the goblin and mentioned as a commonplace which no one should need to be told, that such abortions always have a tragic sensitivity – tragic, too, for all around them, for it so often leads to the atrophy of normal feeling and thus to the woe of others.

Well, what was the truth?

She might sit there till it was dark, listening to the gale pressing on the panes, so high and steady that it sounded like the continuous, hollow roar of a train in a tunnel; she might rise up, curse herself aloud, weep, cry Clem's name again and again, beg her forgiveness, weep and weep, going up and down through the house, unable to keep still for very torment, as she had done, ah, how many times since Clem's ruin, sometimes half the night, crying, pressing her head to the

wall, stretching up her hands, making again and again the involuntary motion, the instinctive, imploring gesture of the drowning – yet still deny it, still see that she could answer the charge quite honestly and effectively, if she could but give words to the truth, the simple, subtle truth known only to herself and Clem. Still she had that plea which must be allowed, because it was the invisible reality, 'Nevertheless, I love her!' Still she could say, 'Neither my wickedness nor Clem's weakness, but the thing which bound us together – that was our ruin. Who was responsible for that?'

But the judgement day which had dragged on for years was now nearly over. She awaited the verdict, hardly caring.

It had grown so late, so early, that in the hollow depth of the bad spot no light showed, no feature was visible, only its black rim at the hilltops. Stars were overhead. It was nearly morning. When she opened the window, holding hard to the casement, the great flight of air felt dry and scouring. She shut the window, heard the clock chime below with its friendly voice. 'But now she sleeps.'

Not another tear of hers would fall. No, there is no virtue in uncritical wallowing in self-abasement. One should not give way to wild excesses of remorse, since self-condemnation can be fully as dishonest as self-excuse.

The next day, Mrs Stewart made one of her routine visits, pushing in, as she so often did nowadays, without waiting for an invitation, yet, oddly enough, not altogether against Catherine's wishes, for the woman diverted her to some extent from her troubles. Then, on a strange, perhaps ironical impulse, Catherine put the letter into her hand.

Mrs Stewart was not shocked. She took it all in with the cool, business-like interest of an expert, a veteran in the confessional, and, her jealousy being aroused as by a rival fault-finder of different persuasions, she was inclined to quarrel

with the writer, whom she pronounced hysterical, and thus to take Catherine's part up to a point.

Then she concluded, 'Look no further for a reason as to why it was done. You needed correction. Evidently nothing short of your sister's suffering would have roused you. You needed *that* to bring you to your senses. You may object that God would hardly bring about your salvation at your sister's expense, so to speak, but it's not for you to question God's dealings with your sister. That's between Him and her. . . . Now, why don't you turn to the Church? Your spiritual director would explain everything to you. For of course you are in a state of total darkness. Well, think it over.' And she took her leave very well satisfied with the progress that was being made.

Catherine no longer attempted to shut her door to this woman for whose company she began to have a mischievous appetite, whose impertinent catechisms and homilies had been somewhat redeemed from the first by the austere, simple-minded manner in which they were spoken. At least there was no crass and insolent discounting of the spiritual, as with her late mentors. They were both harsh and ravaged people, each in her own way, and could both hear home truths and take them without flinching, still less collapsing. And if Catherine's fortitude came from previous deep self-awareness, so that nothing bad said of her could ever take her by surprise, and Mrs Stewart's merely from natural toughness, this did not spoil the game.

Then at length Catherine said to herself that this game was like the last, this vain play with the wiles of conversion, and that her own malice, and the food offered her, so earthy and discredited, all belonged to that black regency under which the poor bird falls with broken wing into the wood, not killed.

LEANING over the bed, with the young woman beside her, Catherine looked down upon the small, stiff, melancholy face on the pillow. She looked at it with confused, pained emotion. It had shocked her, and of course was obviously shocking in itself. The sun shone muted through the tinted curtains, and there the little boy lay, as if in a half coma. In that screened light, which had a faint lilac tinge, he did not look pale, his skin seemed oddly darkened, its summer-long sunburn not yet faded. Urged by Olive, she spoke his name, though without conviction. Yet when she had spoken, the long eyes, with the whites gleaming secretively under the half-shut lids, moved a little, and the lips moved.

'What did he say? "Mummy"?' Olive whispered, deceiving herself.

'I thought it was "Emmy".'

Olive lifted her hands and screwed them together, and turned on her companion a pale face and imploring eyes. But the young woman, Catherine saw, was not about to reproach her - no, she had not that to fear.

Catherine had been brought there by an unexpected summons. 'Could you possibly come to see me?' Olive had

written. 'I can't leave the children. Simon is unwell. I should be so glad to have a talk with you.' The letter, though very brief, had not sounded hostile. But it had offered no explanation, and a wish to prevent a meeting between Catherine and her husband might have been read into it. Catherine had delayed answering, feeling unable to make such an effort. But then, with another, more urgent note, frankly appealing, Olive had sent the car to fetch her from Ockentree to this large, new house in the Hog's Back country, which Hungerford had designed and built for himself.

Now Catherine stood by the bed with a bewildered and almost outraged feeling, staring down at a strange, piteous little caricature of the melancholic stupor. And the fantastic idea of contagion intruded, of a pestilent influence attached to bricks and timbers; the impossible idea that the sickness was the same, of the same germ.

'Really like that? Not speaking – not moving –?'

She was conscious of nothing but a kind of offence in this heartless mimicking of anguish, conscious of indignation at this little ape of a suffering so deadly that no child could ever be capable of feeling it.

'Well, he's only a child – he'll get over it, of course.' Could her voice really sound as weary and careless as it did to her own ears? 'It's hysterical, I suppose. A hysterical illness which will soon give way to proper treatment. And your doctor – what does he say?'

Olive touched her arm and led her into the next room.

'Oh, what can have happened? It was as soon as ever he got home! Oh, it's so horribly queer, isn't it?' she said, and could be seen to be one of those to whom queerness is terrible and repulsive.

Catherine hesitated. 'Well, he's a rather unusual, subtle little character – so I feel. And, well, precocious . . .'

'A little savage!' Olive vehemently whispered, coming close. 'Yes, really that,' and her face was suddenly convulsed with frightened repugnance.

'Why – children are, I've always understood.'

'No, literally. Wild, wild – haven't you noticed? What's the good of being sentimental and pretending about black people? Look at that prognathous face – it is primitive – nearer to the ape's than our own! What's the good of pretending?' she cried despairingly. 'He should be sent away – not come near my child!'

And then, nearly weeping, she stammered without explaining anything clearly for a little longer, as if afraid to give a name to any of the trouble; but at last this latter part of the picture took form.

Simon had come back full of 'the little house', full of talk of Emmy. And it was a pity, Olive added, that Catherine's young friend had kept sending him cards; but she herself had not realized the effect of these at first and so had let him have them. There had been no address, so they could not ask that no more might be sent. 'Besides, I thought, "He'll soon forget her, children don't remember people long once they're parted from them." Martin was still away.'

'She just meant to amuse him – it was done in fun, I'm sure. She's a lively girl.'

'Oh, I expect so,' Olive admitted persuadably, as if desiring to conciliate her. 'Oh, of course. And they were just funny cards – most of them. I did think some of them a little vulgar – but a child wouldn't see that, after all. Still, it got on my nerves a bit, that and his everlasting talk of her, and I admit I got angry and told him, "Don't keep talking of the little house, don't be so naughty!" It seemed to me at last that he was doing it simply to annoy me, because he saw it was a bit painful for me to have everything compared – you know –

everything compared – Yes, but he seemed quite well. But after a few days of this excited chatter he suddenly became very quiet and dreamy. I thought he was tired and put him to bed, and kept him there next day. He lay all that day oddly quiet, sleeping a lot. Still, there didn't seem to be anything wrong, physically, and I thought perhaps you had simply been letting him sit up a little too late. . . . When he was out of bed again, he seemed to have become completely wrapped up in himself. More and more, after that, we had to keep telling him to listen when we spoke to him. Then Martin came home.

'He came home very tired, still anxious about his work. Simon was up then – Martin wouldn't believe that anything was wrong, but he hadn't time to watch the child and examine him properly, as I had. At last I went in when Martin was working and told him to look out of the window – for I couldn't bear it all by myself any more! Simon was standing down there, down by the sundial, with one arm on the top, leaning against it, his forehead on his arm. A good way off, as you see. His back was turned to us. Martin looked and smiled. "Well? Simon playing in the garden." I didn't answer, so he asked, rather irritably, "Why is he wearing those rubber boots? They're not good for him." The garden was dry as a bone. I said it was a game – he wanted to wear them all the time. He had got into the way of it at Ockentree. "Well, what precisely is the matter? What is he supposed to be doing? What are we looking at – so solemnly?" Oh, but Martin's like that – he will not see what he doesn't want to see. No, not until he has to. . . . I told him what was wrong – that Simon was back at *the little house*. The garden there is very damp, isn't it? Full of pools. So you bought him those boots. I told Martin. He still argued – but I saw, because he couldn't bear to do otherwise. "Yes, a fascinating garden for a little

boy, no doubt. It's natural that he should have woven it into his make-believe." I said it was not natural – not natural at all! "You surely aren't upset like this because Simon chooses to put on waders on a dry day? Obviously he's playing some game which requires it. As for that garden – why, yes, what little boy doesn't love messing about with water? It has become, for the time being, part of his play-world." Oh, he argued hard! But all that while, Simon had been standing still, quite still, in that dreadful, *sick* attitude. And I could feel that, like myself, every moment Martin was praying and praying to see him move – begin to jump about, you know, strut and gesture, as children do, playing.

'He began not to answer us at all. He grew worse. Now he seems not to hear or see. And tomorrow we have a specialist coming, an alienist, for our own doctor can't find anything to account for it. . . . Oh, but children don't go out of their minds, do they! Surely they don't. I've never heard of it. . . . But you don't think, do you, that anything could have happened while he was with you to account for it in any way? Anything whatever? No! I think, myself, that he was quite well when he came home – he looked very healthy. Martin has blamed me so for sending him away – but that's what I tell him.'

Catherine realized that, far from being reproached or suspected, she was being supplicated. The young woman herself was facing accusation and hoped for an ally in her, a witness in her defence. Olive wanted to hear Simon's summer justified. She was not concerned to find out the truth, but only to have it demonstrated that she had done nothing wrong in sending the child to Ockentree. She hoped to hear Catherine deny absolutely that there could have been any harmful influence at the cottage. She hoped thus to clear herself.

'He was very well all the time he was with us, as far as I

could judge, only the heat seemed to affect his appetite a little now and again.' When Catherine had said this, the young woman gave her a grateful look. Catherine was about to try explaining, 'But he's an emotional little creature –' when there was the sound of a car at the front of the house, and Olive, flushing and darting to a window, cried, 'Oh, dear, he's early! It's Martin.' But there was a suggestion that, after all, she was glad of this, since the witness had proved friendly.

ALMOST at once they heard him running quickly and quietly up the stairs. Olive went out and met him with some explanation. Catherine, hearing them go into Simon's room, went to the door and stood there, waiting. She felt calm. They came out after a very few minutes.

No, he did not look overwhelmed or in any way broken, as she had expected – so much had his doting love of the child impressed itself upon her. Only his eyes were red, as if from sleeplessness. But his manner was dry and cold. 'Olive, I believe, imagined you might be able to elucidate things for us, that you might be able to cast some light.' The sarcasm was barely hidden, and was directed as much at his wife as at herself.

She told him, unresentfully, that she knew nothing whatever to account for it. Only the child had taken a great fancy to Emmy Rivers, her young friend, and was perhaps unsettled by that parting. But no normal child could come to any serious harm from such a thing.

'Ah,' said Martin, breathing deeply. 'Miss Hare! – *your young friend!* Who was so good with Simon! Such an ideal

young person to have charge of a child! –' But he broke off, with a bitter pinching of the lips.

Catherine realized that he had information which he had not, for some reason, passed on to his wife, and indeed he had broken off as if having spoken impetuously and not wishing to explain himself – and of course she could only remember the Unicorn and Mrs Stewart's accusing eyes.

She was astonished at her own indifference, and spoke quietly, defending Emmy. 'You mustn't blame her. She was fond of Simon. If she treated him unsuitably in any way, it was done in ignorance. She is used to children, but they are people not of your class. . . . But he's an odd little fellow, he has odd moods. Odd, dull, unfeeling moods. We both noticed it. No, the child wasn't normal when he came to us – you can't deny it; he himself told us that he had ill-treated the baby.'

Olive's sudden look of dark reproach cast at her husband told a tale which all but exonerated her. Hungerford's face met this with a spasm of bitter protest. And as if afraid of further reference to a tender point, he coldly invited the visitor to come downstairs, thus shutting out Olive. They went into a fine, spacious room, sparsely and delicately furnished, on the ground floor. Near one of the long windows lay a toy animal of some fantastic description, with its legs in the air. He went to the desk and pulled out a drawer, irresolutely, but then stood as if debating within himself.

The unhappy argument brimmed over, he spoke it aloud. 'Some form of nervous exhaustion – that explains it. Obviously there's been some strain of which we know nothing, about which we're quite in the dark. Something which has exhausted him – something which has been exacting of him far too great an expenditure of nervous energy. A tension which has gone on for a long while. Something which

violently stimulated and exhausted him – perhaps some adult feeling for which he's much too young. And of course you don't know of anything like this?'

She was silent.

He fiddled with a few papers, pushed in the drawer, searched another, and then came up to her with something in his hand.

'You can't help us, but at least you can refrain from persecuting us. I ask you now, for your own sake as much as for mine, to cease taking measures like this.' His tone was so altered and unexpected that she glanced up at him. His face was severe and full of contempt.

As she did not put out her hand to receive it, he laid the card on the arm of her chair, saying, 'You'll recognize this, I believe. Simon, too, has had cards, but they come openly from your young friend. This is anonymous.'

She saw the manicured, elegant finger-tips as they laid the card down, and there seemed to be something ironical in the gesture, a slightly exaggerated elegance, which was cruel and fleeing – but was probably only an unconscious manifestation of a distaste he could not control. A postcard of disreputable appearance. It bore a few lines of block-lettering, and she noticed that the first sentence, though coarsely done, was firm, clear and stylish, while the rest might have been formed by an illiterate hand.

'Woe to the foxes, the little foxes. What did you get out of that deal at Ockentree? R.I.B.A., I. S.A., etc. A nasty show-up. The sins of the fathers, etc., etc.'

There was a short pause.

'– the foxes, the little foxes –' She involuntarily pictured Emmy's little piquant face with the narrowed, sparkling, full-lidded eyes, smiling sidelong; but it had undergone a slight distortion, the whole face seemed heavier and looked

intensely Jewish, as it had never looked to her before. A revengeful people!

But her mind cleared. That singular mixture of threat, sinister hint and jocosely melodrama which the disgraceful postcard conveyed – it had seemed familiar, she had almost caught the rolling eye behind it. On second thoughts, however, she could not attribute it to Emmy, who was after all a philosopher, and a hard-headed one; but she thought of the party at the Unicorn. Her suspicion made her feel a little implicated and uncertain, and in a manner which therefore could not be frank, she observed, 'It looks as if that was written as a joke.'

'You've someone in mind?'

She was evasive and said, 'But surely it isn't a thing one can take seriously?'

'You had someone in mind,' he repeated, and she noticed the change of tense. 'Sometimes writers of such threatening letters, to divert suspicion from themselves, imitate the style of an innocent acquaintance.'

'A threat? No, surely it's more like a joke,' she insisted.

'It strikes you as funny! Well, the whole thing has a sort of facetiousness, of course. But the implication, Miss Hare, is not at all funny. The implication is that I was bribed – there's a threat to cause me annoyance by reporting me to one or another of the important architectural societies, which possibly have methods of dealing with unsatisfactory members – though that's something out of my experience. But even if a man had done nothing whatever to be ashamed of, it would still be decidedly unpleasant to have it rumoured among friends and acquaintances in the profession that he had. It's sufficiently unpleasant to have such a thing come through the post. . . . No, you see, not quite an innocent joke. A vicious attempt at mischief-making, in short, by an ignorant and

naïve person – and none the less vicious for being absurd and ineffective, for of course although it might cause me annoyance, it couldn't possibly damage me.'

In a bitter voice, suddenly and strikingly full of emotion, almost tearful, he added, 'Moreover, what do you make of that "woe to the little foxes"? I'm not unaware that my hair is reddish – and so is my little boy's! Isn't that the threat of someone who has, or had, power to injure Simon?'

'Come!' she said in astonishment. 'Can you really suppose I wrote this card?' She had turned the thing over and found a vulgar picture, the applicability of which, if any, she did not attempt to fathom.

'Since we're being perfectly frank – yes, I think you did. At a moment of anger and excitement, which you now probably regret.'

'It's not to my taste,' she said, faintly smiling, putting the card down. 'Did you think it was?'

'I think you must know,' he replied in an unyielding voice, 'that to imitate illiteracy and vulgarity is a well-known trick with writers of poison-pen letters.'

Nevertheless, he had looked at her. Not at all a stupid face, he saw now, still less a mean or brutish one. He was conscious that he had been prejudiced all along by its unhappy total lack of beauty. Her large, lined forehead so fiercely barred by the two upright strokes between the brows gave the whole face a character of desperation. Not thus would such a woman take her revenge – if she wanted revenge.

He hesitated. He drew up his shoulders and even smiled. His mistake was flagrant, and he had seen this at once, yet he felt quite unable to retract his accusation, for upon that offence his soul had pounced while he was still terribly shaken by what had seemed to him a threat to Simon, so that he had lost his judgement. It had been pure relief to him to think that

she had put herself in the wrong. If this fact had hardly put him in the right, it had in some mysterious fashion gone a little way towards doing so. He could not acknowledge his mistake.

So he cried, softly, biting, in a voice shaking with exasperation, 'If ever a man suffered for an act of charity -!' He had made that kind of pretence people make at such moments of speaking to himself. He said to her, 'You have *that* against me, haven't you? Perhaps there's a slight feeling of vindictiveness?'

'No - I don't think so - I don't seem to care much now,' she answered with shattering indifference.

He retreated, but he would not abandon his disproved weapon. He retreated to safer ground. And he was still dishonest when he said, 'But what did you expect that cottage to be? I'm really at a loss!' Now, however, he was on the right side again, and he added quite courteously, 'I'm sorry indeed that you didn't understand the limitations you had to expect.'

She was taken in. 'Yes, what simpletons we were!' she thought, standing in silence. She suddenly pictured their ignorance through his eyes, and thought that it might really seem incredible to him; and she felt ashamed, and felt a terrible pang for Clem, so easily cheated in her weakness.

But then he was led to continue: 'After all, there was no great harm done. You had only to sell again if you found it unsuitable. . . . As I've told you, prices are hardening all the time - you could sell now, I should say, practically without loss. I do admit, I allowed you to pay a trifle too much for the cottage,' he added hastily, 'because I saw you were so keen to have it.'

Three words were all she heard of this, and she could hardly believe her ears.

'No harm done!' she whispered. 'Don't you know that it cost Clem her reason?'

At this, he was visibly shocked, flushed and said quickly, though not without tones of bitterness and exasperation, 'I've deeply regretted my reference to your sister that day - the day I called - about Simon - in the spring. I had come, you know, all on impulse, without telling my wife - she had no opportunity to warn me. I rarely meet Margaret. My wife hadn't seen fit to tell me - afraid, perhaps, of worrying me. You did realize on that occasion, I do hope, that I'd no idea your sister was ill. The fact had been kept from me! I heard nothing about it till - a little before sending for Simon. . . . Now she's gone. What shall I say? In cases like that, so much worse than death -' But he stopped, no doubt despairing of pulling the situation into decent enough shape to venture upon condolence.

But she remembered too vividly his manner then; his dry and disdainful and self-conscious amusement, the amusement of a man who supposes himself to have made a ludicrous conquest, who supposes himself to have fascinated some foolish, unattractive woman no longer young. 'Why, the ass!' she thought, and gave a brief smile. She remembered that Clem had disliked him and striven to be especially agreeable to him for that reason, feeling that she had cause for gratitude. She said nothing.

'You mustn't blame me,' he repeated nervously, 'for a hideous blunder due to ignorance.'

Indeed, she felt not the slightest anger against him. It seemed absurd that she had ever regarded him as to blame, in any serious sense, for the tragedy.

'Blame you?' she said at length, vaguely. 'No, I don't blame you, or very little.' But she was giving his words a general application. 'Who knows? I'd have done the same, perhaps,

in your place. Just the thing that happened to be easiest, I expect. Only – well, it's done! Yes, you were unfortunate when you came in contact with us. Anything could have hurt us. The least touch, to send us one way or the other. Yes, really you were unfortunate. . . . But, at the same time, you'll have to take what's coming to you now –'

'Take what's coming to me?' he repeated, half mimicking her, disdainful, but alert and shocked at the threat, as it appeared to be.

'Yes, I saw it, I'll tell you now, and didn't lift a finger to prevent it. Wait – no, not for revenge – indeed, I don't know why! I couldn't feel it mattered. I hadn't the strength. You felt we didn't matter. I came to feel you didn't matter – you and Simon – and can't rid myself of the feeling.'

In an indignant voice in which despair sounded, he protested, 'But a child, a child!'

'Yes, you'd have thought I might feel sorry for a child. I should have thought so myself.' And she felt it was like the deadening of pain in the last stages of cancer. She added, 'But a child has no better right to be considered than a grown-up. Why do you think he has?'

'So you saw it and "didn't lift a finger"! For a helpless, innocent child! You admit it.'

'Well, the helpless and innocent aren't always children. Children haven't the monopoly of innocence. Far from it. And, anyway, who should suffer but the innocent? Who else?' She saw Clem's high, benevolent forehead, a little prominent and child-like, and saw it twitch into the last maniacal frown.

'Oh, Clem!' she cried, without being aware of him any longer, or of where she was.

She stood up. Suddenly she felt stifled, her head swam; she looked for windows and doors, wishing to get out, but some-

how not able to think what to do to achieve this. She saw the toy animal, even stooped a little to look at it, having been puzzled all along as to what it was meant to be. All kinds of trivial reflections arose, were hastily seized and hastily crammed into the widening gap through which the flames showed.

She began to walk carefully, putting out her hand to lean on things in the way, for she was dizzy; while abruptly, impatiently she threw out the words, referring to everything in her life from beginning to end, 'Yes – guilty – guilty –.'

Never would she seek excuse for herself on the grounds of psychological illness. Even the miserable goblin was guilty. There are evil spirits.

HE let her go, did not accompany her to the door; for indeed he felt ill. He had even forgotten Simon.

If he had thought them a pair of ageing, insignificant, unattractive creatures, hardly women any longer, *for whom anything was good enough*, what man could blame him? A brutal, uncivilized judgement, but the usual one.

But a man of *his* refinement of feeling!

It was true, of course it was true. But he stood looking the thing in the face for the first time. It was true, it was true that he had been reprehensibly careless. He had taken a chance on things working out better than he could foresee. And certainly he had had no right to take such a chance.

Ah, but between the lot of them they had pushed him to it! He had groaned inwardly and wished for courage to be graceless while Margaret Forrester, a dear, charming woman whom he had always admired, had made her appeal on Clemence Hare's behalf. He had lacked the coarseness to refuse. He was bound to Mrs Forrester by the tie of her long friendship with his first wife, and this in a peculiarly affecting manner. That strain of dark blood in Jessica, that very quality which had appeared exotic and exciting to a susceptible and unthinking

youth, so that he had fallen violently in love with her, a woman much older than himself, a later, worldly-wise judgement had come to make him feel was bitterly unfortunate. It had turned out to be more obvious to other people than he had ever thought possible in his youthful ignorance, and to be met with unforeseen prejudice. Then Margaret's sensible, warm-hearted friendship had accepted it as a fact of interest and charm; and for this he had always regarded her with a deep gratitude. It was not a gratitude which could be expressed except in deeds and he had always seized gladly on any chance to oblige her.

He could not have refused her request; a small one, as it must have seemed to her, and not even made on her own behalf; simply a kindness in which she had invited his co-operation.

Then had come his meeting with the two of them, the little deformity with the repellent manner, and his faded admirer. In a way, it had amused him. Hiding his irritation with an ironic courtesy, the irony of which they were too stupid to fathom (as he had supposed), he had taken leave of them resolved to dispatch their business at top speed.

His shrugging dismay at the sight of the cottage was vivid with him still. 'Give me patience!' he had cried to himself at the bare glimpse of it. An ancient with all the vices of sheer old age. Yet a tough ancient, too, in spite of the ominous palsy due to the pounding of the traffic. And it was, after all, he had argued, a case of ignorance and bliss. What the eye did not see would not grieve the heart. (At the age of something past fifty, simplicity has become absurd and calls for no mercy! Surely that is so?) These two women, in their fatuous ignorance, would go on happily enough till the roof fell on their heads – and that most probably would never happen. It was by no means a certainty that it would not happen, but it

was a fair probability. And, moreover, the house was saleable; saleable, after all, if they did not care for their bargain – only they would have had to drop a lot. (But hadn't he known, even then, that prices were likely to rise extravagantly? To be honest, he had not foreseen it. Yet if he could but believe he had –.)

He remembered standing at the top of the garden, gazing down upon the mighty, tell-tale weeds and fuming with annoyance which amounted to a kind of malaise, a longing to be through with a maddening interruption in his tensely calculated programme – to be done with it at any price. He had heard much of this garden, which they had believed to be so promising. But one knew what the gardens of such women were like: a little ground where they could coddle a few favourite plants – and there it was, a little patch of workable ground up near the house, all among the privies. For of the romantic grandeur of Catherine's plans he had no conception.

Oh, it would do; it *must* do! 'For I must settle them,' he had thought with desperation, 'or they will send me running hither and thither,' and he thought of how he would be expected to examine yet another inaccessible little hovel, and then another, until they were settled; and such straitened people with their precious savings are notoriously difficult to suit. For many months previously he had been working under pressure, with an anxiety sometimes approaching agitation. His nerves were at full stretch. He must end it.

That was how he had come to commit this subtle transgression. He had disposed of a gadfly of a situation, and had disposed of it artfully, for good; a deeper consciousness than the one he admitted assuring him that they were settled to such an extent that they would never require his services again – because they could not afford to 'drop a lot'.

And if for a weak moment he allowed himself a little com-

fort in the thought that now, not much more than two years after, the picture was quite changed, prices having risen beyond anyone's reckoning, it was only to remember that now it was too late; too late for the mad one, for the dead one.

But Hungerford was not a callous man; he was a very sensitive man; he was so sensitive that he felt ill after this scene he had been through, restrained though it had been. Its intensely dramatic quality had been felt by him to the full, nor had the tragedy escaped him, not his own tragedy, but theirs; he had fineness enough for that. During the past quarter of an hour his nerves had been tensed almost unendurably, and felt all drawn out, as if he had been through some form of torture. His very body felt stiff and awkward, he was conscious of his own gestures. He was so sensitive that he could not bear to think of what he had done – and that was how he had ceased to think of it.

'Well, face it,' he thought at last. 'Reprehensibly careless.'

If that had been all! But it was not all. There had been other motives – no, not motives, but other influences; grounds for another charge, far more disreputable.

He was back in the sour, water-logged garden and had just come to an exasperated stand, a point where he had all but confessed the game was up, his precious time had been wasted in vain; and at that moment he was accosted by the small man in gumboots whom he had noticed crossing the plank bridge to a neighbouring plot a little higher up the stream, who had come splashing up out of the water, grinning, like a bandy-legged dog. They had exchanged a few guarded comments upon the cottage and had fallen into talk, led by a common knowledge and experience of building conditions. Then it happened that the young woman, Mrs Ransom, seeing her neighbour, had run down the grass balk of the next plot to beg saucily for an invitation to lunch, she being a

friend of the man's wife; and so an invitation to himself had followed. He had accepted it because it happened to be convenient; he had left his car in the town and would have had some little way to walk before he could get a meal. Or he had accepted it because he could very happily bear the sight of that pretty, soft-eyed face for a little longer.

So they had crossed over and she had picked her way between them over the water meadow and up through the garden of the big house.

But how tainted and heavy with meaning was this whole incident in retrospect! That little impromptu luncheon party, for the short-comings of which nobody had apologized, had at once achieved a strange air of intimacy, almost of conspiracy, though nothing at all memorable had been said. They had laughed a good deal, he remembered, yet he could not recall any particularly amusing remark or anecdote – it was rather that a kind of cynical humour connected with the cottage had seemed to be in the air and pervading all the talk, even though the place had not been discussed, barely mentioned.

Yet surely he had imagined that later! For the idea was really very horrible – too indecent to entertain.

He seemed now to picture that ill-assorted quartette, of which he was one, sitting there jesting like conspirators or people in high spirits who wink at each other over a shady understanding. Fantastic! As far as he could remember he had said little about the cottage, he had been discreet enough.

But *she* had said – yes, sweetly, ingenuously she had told him that she and her husband did so want to get their price for the cottage, or something very near it; it was so vital to them that they should, and sell quickly, too; and had spoken artlessly of her coming baby. He had smiled and said, 'You're

asking rather too much;' but did not say 'much too much', still less that such a price could only be regarded as an impudent try-on. She was innocent of any dishonest intention, perhaps, but a coaxing creature of soft femininity, with her little lullaby voice dragging out the commonplace phrases until they blushed with meaning; a born charmer. The weather was warm, an unpleasant, clammy languor was upon him; the air of the damp valley was bad, and he felt it. In fact, he had been doing too much of late. And the young woman, caressive and flattering, her pregnancy just visible, had affected him disastrously.

So when the husband had gone off, unceremonious and obviously not caring what his wife felt or what happened in his house, he had had the folly to linger, talking with soothed vanity to the two women in the large, lofty, sunny room from which they overlooked a decayed, overgrown garden full of decrepit trees long untended and throttled by masses of the parasite ivy. There he had stayed, behaving with great folly, wasting precious time, while now and again taking an astonished glance at himself. For soon all his attention was given to the younger woman, the hostess making a silent third – but of course it was her presence which had emboldened him, alone with the charmer he would have been more wary. At moments he had vaguely wondered at her. She was ambiguous; a pale, rather mannish creature with censorious eyes; an austere woman, she seemed, yet displaying a curious forbearance with the little purring beauty, an indulgence which had almost an air of tenderness. But her he had hardly taken into account. Oh, no, it was not his hostess's attractions or the husband's schemes which had caused him to linger so long in the house of this uncongenial couple, the wife off-hand and unwelcoming, the man a type of wolfish speculator, a shady ranger on the outskirts of his

professional world, with whom he would ordinarily have had no dealings; a little fair, bandy Jew.

Nothing had come of it, of course, and nothing was intended by the young woman to come of it – except an advantageous sale of her cottage. She was merely a natural flirt; but in his supersensitive state, her gravid and innocent animalism had caught him fast, and he had taken away a disturbing, enkindling memory, morally weakening.

So she had got something very near her price.

THE car ran quietly, rather slowly, downhill, between banks, hollies, tall beech hedges. Its open window gathered in snatches of the wild, stony songs of the robins, together with the honied scent which the bluish pines with the long cones exuded. At intervals they passed large houses. Vast, ornamental trees of great majesty and perfect form suggested the scale of the gardens within. Masses of yellow leaves lay by the roadside. It was the hour when the trees stand dark against the west and the rays of the sun blind and confuse, shining levelly. The walls ended, and there came a sweep of open country with a distant wood of oaks which the faint sun fired to the pinkish auburn of human hair, giving it the light and sun-soaked look of hanging long faded in a southern room and there for a while she had before her eyes the house from which she had come, far-off, placed on a southward-sloping hillside, facing open land and backed by the woods; a most beautiful site.

But if she had not been told, in coming, that that was the house, she would have doubted it. For that intensely posed building set on a knoll in the forest, a little more elaborate than her untutored eye was prepared for, had at once struck

her as old-fashioned. This epithet she applied, without knowing it, because of certain features which resulted in a subtle predominance of the verticals, a light imaginative echo of the gothic which had been happily woven into its design; fanciful touches which the architect had permitted himself and which the woodland setting absorbed in utmost harmony.

A house in the newest of new fashions, had she known it, entirely of its times; product of an imagination tinged, after the modern manner, with neuroticism. A sophisticated romantic, beautifully at one with its romantic yet softly cultivated setting, reminiscent of a building placed on a knoll in a leafy tapestry. The shadows lay across its lawns, but the house stood clear of these still, its façade flushed with light.

There it stood; a vanity, a folly; for all that elaborate charm enclosed nothing but a little dreaming face turned to the wall, a little savage mind gone back, gone back to sleep, gone inward, returned to the dark mother, making the one protest in its capacity.

Thick screens of branches, a press of other memories, obliterated the picture, and for ever.

Soon, climbing from chill, shadowy depths, they came to the straight, long-drawn, rampart-like road with the black sentinel hollies at its parapets. On either hand appeared great stretches of country, meadow on meadow, with ranges of elms knotting the hedgerows, with hamlets, spires, towers, dark tongues of woodland; all growing smaller, dimmer, diminutive in the distance, spidery frail, finally to be lost in the blue mist. Countryside after countryside was spread out before her, like a land of promise, and she remembered seeing it, long ago, in full daylight in the sunny spring, when she had cried, 'Ah, Clem, look at that! Is it possible that we shall ever live there?' It had been possible.

Strangely she felt now that it was through some defect of her eyes that she could not see it as she had seen it then, not because night was falling.

The man switched on the headlights and that promising land, too, was extinguished for ever.

The car now ran at great speed and in a noiseless way, and from this effortless progress she began to draw a kind of comfort, which was not physical; for her body felt so weak and inert that she wondered, without giving speculation a name, and, in fact, without the least sensible apprehension, what had happened to her. It might well be that something fatal had happened; for how had she gone on so long, even as it was, weak being, under blow after blow? '*How can you expect her to take such a load?*' Fragments of that cruel dream out of the famous book still haunted her, lamentably applied to her own case with the savage humour, the utilization of the grotesque in its torments, in which hell delights. And the prophetic answer had been, she remembered well, '*Come on . . . no pity.*'

Yet now, suggested to her perhaps by the powerful motion and gentle cradling of the car, she had a presentiment that something had at last taken charge; something new in which there was no cruelty because there was no human feeling, only a purpose. She felt rescued, wrested away. Something had taken charge of her, of her will and conscience, and all the terrible disorder of heart and mind, and henceforth everything would be done for her. No more heavenly feeling could come upon one always and by nature helpless and now mortally weary. '*Rest. Sit still. It will all be done for you.*'

An illusion, apparently – and what else could it have been? In the darkness, they had come down into Ockentree and were drawing up before the cottage; and once more she had to rouse up her exhausted, reluctant body, and the man –

this barely polite chauffeur, whose dry and supercilious manner reminded her of his master's, coarsened – did not even open the door for her. Still, after all, she could do it for herself, although she had first to think and her hands seemed to be all thumbs; and she could stand also, and cross the pavement; and, encouraged by this, she looked round to wish the man goodnight, only to find the car already drawing away and the man's face turned.

She stood gazing after it, while feeling for her key. So then she was looking towards a point a little lower down, a little past the entrance to the steps which led down to their own right of way. There the road widened, and starting from there a line of cars was parked along the kerb, as was often the case at night because a hundred yards or so down the road was a public hall where there was frequently some sort of occasion in the evenings. Now and again a car drew out of this line or came in. Two moved as she looked. The road was full of lights; the light fell on the sheen of the cars and the whole line glittered. The traffic roared by. Noise and glitter both dazzled her to some odd degree; the hubbub of the road made a sudden unbearable assault on her senses.

She closed the door on it, and the little, cold, malevolent house received her in silence and darkness. For the moment that seemed better. She felt exhausted and a little dizzy, but not really ill.

'I must rest,' she said aloud, speaking aloud purposely; for her face felt queer, she was conscious of her mouth in an odd way, her lower jaw seemed slightly out of control when she formed the words. But she formed them. It was nothing; she was only very tired. In the dark, she began to pull off hat and coat, and while doing this she heard a soft tapping on the garden door in the basement. She heard it most unwillingly. But it did not make her nervous, she was beyond that,

and anyway had never lacked physical courage. The tapping was soft and brief, and it was not repeated. Then she fancied the handle was slightly turned. A stream of traffic hurtled by with a great clatter and she heard no more. She went down through the kitchen, turning up the lights, opened the back door wide, without hesitation. A tall, a very tall man stood there framed against the blackness of all the valley, with the light from the room falling upon him.

He was something of a shock. Besides being of that unusual, almost abnormal height, he was handsome, rankly handsome, in a dark, strongly aquiline way, but his face was arresting on another and less agreeable score, for he had but one eye and the other lid was fallen down upon the empty socket. However, from this fixed, inadvertent wink any suggestion of gamesomeness was entirely lacking, for the natural flattening of the eyebrow over the blind side, forming a one-sided scowl, made the effect anything but light-hearted. Yet the impression produced was not so much of something bad as of something mutilated and ruinous. She said to herself, as she could not fail to do at the sight of that disfigurement, 'Well, this is the gentlemanly Ferdy, of course, this is Rest-in-peace;' and, true, gentlemanly he was as far as his clothes went, which perhaps had been Emmy's meaning.

A blackguard barely in disguise, she would have thought him at one time, and would have shrunk from him – a creature from an underworld with which she could never have any sort of contact. As it was, it could hardly be that they would be found to speak the same language. Yet something was said, she did not know what; she stood aside and he came lightly and swiftly into the room, and at once walked into the kitchen where she had drawn the curtains.

'But Emmy isn't here now,' she said at random. 'Did you not know?'

He began to speak, and it was as she had expected; the hoarse, deep voice with peculiar slurrings, the curious elliptical slang he employed, made him almost unintelligible to her. She gathered that he was offering sympathy of a kind, based, she thought, on some parallel experience of his own, involving his own father (who was not Emmy's); and she heard with surprise that it was a kind of plaint to which she was listening, not at all the growling, animal protest one might have expected of such a mask, but something mild, elegiac, in which the words 'put inside', 'put away', in a tone of grievance recurred.

She listened with concentration, and asked him if he meant his father had been insane. But she had the curious feeling of having failed to make any sort of contact with him. Perhaps he, too, found her unintelligible. Perhaps indeed she was, for her mouth still felt queer. Instead of answering, he took from his pocket some sort of paper or journal, spread it on the table and dropped upon that a metal object which she stared at in a bemused fashion while she understood him to say that she could take it, keep it, he made her a present of it; an article in any case so foreign to her eyes outside a picture that she leaned forward to look at it in curiosity. She gathered that he was inviting her, with intonations now encouraging, to take hold of it, pick it up. Did she know how to handle a gun? He would show her. She watched him, watched the long, deft fingers swivelling the chamber, slipping the rounds in and out, to demonstrate its working, apparently.

'Better than caged up,' she heard him say.

Then she thought she saw what he was urging upon her.

'But Clem is dead - my sister is dead!' she stammered. She cried out these words to herself. Something had happened in her mind, some icy block of incredulity had shifted, and the

fact of Clem's death had at last come home to her. 'Yes, she is really gone - she has really escaped!' she went on saying, in a heart-broken voice, even while she smiled. 'She's dead. Yes, we are parted - parted at last and for ever. For wherever I go it will be far below her -' talking to him like this because she was hardly aware of speaking at all, and because she could not feel that he could hear and understand her.

She became conscious that he had the air of one taken aback. He seemed, astonishingly, to intimate that the death was a blessing, even to show a species of relief. But he looked at her contemplatively, as if with changed motive, and she saw that he was like one rearranging his plans.

She scarcely heeded what she plainly saw. Her two shades, her two poor ghosts - it was they who rose before her, sight enough to burst one's heart and reason. 'God, if I had had that revolver years and years ago!' she cried. 'But, oh, God, why do I pretend? I could never have used it. Take it. I don't want it.'

Then she saw by his face that he was going to kill her, because of the will, as she could only surmise; and at this, without warning, of its own volition, as it seemed, her flesh utterly rebelled. She turned hurriedly, thinking to run up the stairs to the road and safety, for merely by standing where he was he barred the door on the garden-room. Her girlhood, her deeply wretched, ecstatic, poetry-haunted girlhood, was suddenly very close, in the foreground of her memory; she was back at the edge of the great, mysterious forest, with a heart on fire at the sound of the faint bugles. Oh, the pure, childish dream of the right path! She had time to think, 'What am I running from? The first mercy He has shown me! This mercy, too, I owe to Emmy. Can it be - Emmy under God?' and she could have laughed. Yet still she ran.

EMMY turned the key and then stopped to peer rather dubiously into the little sitting-room before entering. The familiar, cold, ancient smell greeted her.

Many shocking and distressing things had happened since she had last stood on that spot; she herself had undergone an invisible but momentous change. She had stepped from that door as a needy, struggling young woman; she returned as an heiress. Emmy could hardly wish with any sincerity that the change had not come about. But she did lament the cause of it, at this moment with a certain keenness.

She had taken care to come alone, out of a jealous, canny, self-preservative instinct; but now she felt that her impulse had been morbid. To see all the bits of furniture in their accustomed places, and the shabby and familiar hat and coat flung down as if by one only just got in, no one having touched them, and the open book, and the clock unwound, and all the little commonplace objects left dusty and neglected – it was a bad experience. These things met one with an impact which a jolly companion would have helped to dispel.

Besides, Emmy was still a little nervous. She had suffered,

during the past month or so, not only a distressing shock, but much secret apprehension.

It had started with Ferdy's manner – But, no, that was another story.

It had started, then, with communications from the executor, followed by a few inquiries which had seemed to Emmy to have a suspicious tone; and after that had come a long and ominous silence. This had given her the idea that the Law and the relatives were taking a good look at her through some spy-hole. So she had spent a jumpy month or two, awaiting developments, not daring to poke her legal informant. Not a single relative, however, had bestirred himself. Probate was at last granted. And the meeting with the Forresters last week had gone off very successfully – Henry Forrester being the acting executor – for these good people (to whom, it seemed, Catherine had written very favourably of her young friend) had accepted her in a kind and tolerant fashion, whatever their real feelings. If they had got wind of the fact that Emmy was a girl unfortunate in her brother, well, such a girl is not to blame, she is to be commiserated. And Emmy had been, from beginning to end, modest, subdued, fifty years out of date in being black-clothed from head to foot, and all that a refined young woman mourning the death of a friend and benefactress should have been. She had made herself up for the part quite deliberately, it was not to be denied; yet her mourning was genuine. There had been moments when, seeing Margaret Forrester's kind brown eyes fill with tears, Emmy had been hard put to it not to start blubbering herself.

But a week had passed since then, and the beneficiary was in command of her feelings. After the first twingeing moments, she began looking round with a hawk-eye, diverted from grief by the burning question of what she was worth.

She was the owner of a house. She was also the owner of a houseful of very indifferent furniture, for which she had no manner of use and which, from what she could hear, nobody would remove for her, even if paid to do so. Sell up the whole outfit with the furniture thrown in, perhaps? Emmy shrewdly judged that, far from adding to the value of the house, it might even detract from it. But ambition to make something out of every stick in the place would die hard in her.

As for the house itself, it was not merely a house, it was a genuine modernized antique, with a wealth of oak-beams, a number of which were actually oak and originals; and, in addition, it had that lovely, old-world appearance for which fools will always pay through the nose. It should have been worth a mint!

Could it only have stood up to the searchings of an honest examination, in the present fantastic state of the market she would have cleared well over two thousand.

Thanks to old Foxy, she would not.

At this stimulating thought, Emmy went ferreting up and down stairs in a shrewish, biting temper. Little old red-face was at last something beyond a joke. She went poking, peering, fingering and appraising, banging down a sharp little heel on questionable boarding, jabbing at woodwork with a pair of scissors – ah, she knew all the tricks of the trade. She flung aside the abandoned garments without giving them a thought and dealt as summarily with many another pathetic witness.

Oh, it was more than shocking thus to confirm with her own intelligence how much less valuable than it might have been her inheritance was. Only one thousand instead of two – two and a half – three!

Still, she gradually calmed; she put it at one thousand. Her mood grew mellower. Her face cleared; her face finally

sparkled with a look of joyful greed. At the worst, the outlook was bright. The little gem! Almost she would have liked to keep it. There was a profound reluctance to let go of a valuable of such problematical worth. Supposing prices went even higher? It made you tremble to act. Lord God, what a stroke of luck! Her dear, kind friend.

Emmy's head began to incline sentimentally. She had never been so happy in her life as in this little house, she said to herself, exaggerating, of course; but still it was true that she had enjoyed herself beyond expectation. There had been the novelty of the place, the amusement of having Simon, and her liking – her more than liking – for Catherine. Yes, it was more than that; her tender pride in her poor invalid.

Thinking thus, she turned to the desk, at which she had so often seen her friend seated, with a sad lowering of mood.

Here Henry Forrester had been at work. With painstaking, kindly thoroughness, perhaps assisted by Margaret, he had cleared the ground for her. He had examined all the contents, tied packages of papers together, labelled each with a direction or suggestion as to what should be done with it – how these might be sent to so-and-so, these destroyed; and on the whole there was little enough to deal with. The packages were few. They were all personal affairs, of course, business having been disposed of. 'I think this should be burned,' was clearly written on one of them. 'These appear to be very private matters which my wife believes she would not have wished read.' Emmy hesitated.

She began to be conscious of the creeping chill of the house on her shoulders. It was winter, though mild. She thought she would burn up a few of these mournful papers and while she was doing it, find a bit of wood outside or coal from the bunker, if the neighbours had left any, and cheer herself up with a little blaze; get a spot of water from one of the inter-

esting old ruins, find some tea and a tin of milk in the larder and boil a kettle. She would have gone to the Unicorn, but that she was a trifle in the red with them – unless her poor friend had made it good? Well, it was all one now.

In the midst of these preparations, a weighty thump overhead caused her to drop everything and spring to the door, crying, in a burst of indignation, so now they had brought down the chimney-stack, had they? For a great stream of traffic was in riotous progress along the road. She rushed upstairs in the bitter, exalted mood of one who had prophesied evil and lived to see it. There was no sign of damage. The noise must have been external. No doubt a lorry carelessly laden had merely thundered by, jolting its wallowing load over a manhole.

Having come to this conclusion, she stood in the middle room for a few minutes – and began listening.

No wonder nothing had been heard. Not a thing going on in that house would be heard, certainly not a fall. Not a cry. Not a cry for help. It was going upstairs which had done it, so they had reckoned. Perhaps running upstairs too fast, attempting to get up that deep, steep little staircase in too much of a hurry. A sudden strain on the heart. So she fell.

If Mrs Stewart hadn't at last taken upon herself to break a window, for the back door was locked and bolted, there she might have been lying now.

Emmy descended into the kitchen slowly, carefully, and for several minutes stood quite still by the table, her dark little countenance looking very old and sharp in its unwonted gravity.

Why go rushing upstairs like that?

You might, if frightened.

Emmy's face grew sullen, the nose drooped, another ten years gathered upon her.

'Well, I didn't tell Ferdy, no, I wouldn't have been so wet as that. Only what did I do but go and tell Roy!'

On October the tenth it had happened. For some moments she did not know why the actual date had suddenly occurred to her so precisely. Then she realized why this was; because it was as good as there, under her eyes. She was standing by the kitchen table, which was covered with American cloth, cloth which had reached the worn, clammy stage when that material easily takes the print of a newspaper put down on it and receiving a pressure. She herself had often washed off such transfers. There the thing was, very faint, partial, upside-down; and Emmy abruptly moved round, without touching the cloth, to fix a long, black stare upon it. She could make out the corner of a line drawing in a slashing, open style – nothing more. But Emmy knew that work of art and what journal it had come out in as well as she knew her own face; knew also the date on which it had appeared, some little incident connected with its publication having fixed in her memory a point which she might otherwise well have forgotten, as it was almost three months ago. Since when had Catherine taken the *People's Peephole*, that valuable weekend mixture of gambling, salacity and class-spite – the *Peephole*, as it was lovingly known to a great section of the mass public? True, the sheet might have been wrapped round something – although publications of that size were rarely put to such use. But on that very day? Impossible! Or could Henry Forrester –? Equally impossible.

But supposing you had thrown the open magazine on the table, and supposing that then you had had sudden occasion to lean hard on the table with one hand as you looked down at something on the floor between the table and the foot of the stairs?

What a mercy he hadn't fired!

Emmy was moved to spasmodic action. She hurriedly took her handkerchief and with the aid of a little soap rubbed out the impress; then went into the garden-room and shut the door on it all, and sat down rather suddenly. She was quite pale. But her thought completed itself unpreventably. 'Never needed to. Just shoved in and threatened her, frightened her.'

Presently the kettle boiled and she mechanically made some tea.

Poor old Ferdy. It must have given him a shock. He didn't like his plans to go awry. It must have upset him. It must have shaken him up properly to have the woman fall down dead on him like that.

But here Emmy made an attempt to adjust her ideas to those higher ways of thinking of which she now had intimations.

Only, first, had the police seen that print? But, Emmy reflected with joy, it wouldn't have been identifiable to anyone but herself, wouldn't have meant a thing to anyone else.

Well, it would have been no good ratting, no good running to the police with a tale, it would have benefited nobody. The poor woman herself wouldn't have wanted her little friend to get slapped down, would she? But Emmy did hope the poor thing, wherever she was (and good luck to her!), would be able to see that point.

The truth was she had been all set for this impression, this print on the cloth. Instinctively, to be on the safe side, she had been publicly amazed to learn of her inheritance, for if she had not known of her inheritance she could not have passed on the news to Ferdy, could she? Greg had kept quiet for her sake, Roy for his own.

And yet, in spite of loyal friends all round, Ferdy was now doing time. Almost at once he had been picked up on some charge one had thought was a bygone - in fact, they had got

him on one small, unimportant facet of those apparently successful spring operations into which Emmy had been so terribly scared of being dragged that she had sought country air. (No, Emmy would never have gone to such lengths as a country holiday merely to escape Mumsie's occasional disposition to murder her. But she did earnestly wish not to be a criminal - so strong was her common sense.) This picking up of Ferdy had looked like sheer petty-mindedness on the part of the police, rather than the thin edge of the wedge. All his friends had thought so. But the idea that the police had framed him simply because they were interested in matters at Ockentree was not so comforting. Had they got wind of his being not a hundred miles from the cottage that night? Did they suspect he had helped the poor thing down the stairs? They must surely know better! No one had anything whatever to fear from Ferdy, in their own persons, but a clean shot. He wasn't the sort to go bashing people, not even elderly women. (Emmy made this reflection with pride.)

So it was that she herself, hearing it was only a fall (and how joyfully she had heard it, in a manner of speaking), a natural death and a fall, would never have suspected anything but for Ferdy's manner. Shocked - upset. Yes, poor old Ferdy.

For you might say he had done nothing. Had Emmy not been cultivating high principles of late, she also might have been able to say so.

However, they could lay for him as they liked; they wouldn't get him on that job.

EMMY now rose briskly, adjusted herself before the glass, wondered what she should do.

Really there seemed no end to the luck! It was a great bit of luck for her, for instance, that her brother was out of the way temporarily.

It struck her that to keep the house might be as good a way as any of keeping Ferdie's hands off her inheritance. So for a minute or two she turned over this idea. She might bring her two little fellows there and make a healthy country home for them; give them all the benefits of a clean village life – for Emmy had never ceased to see this country town with its spreading suburbs as an innocent and backward village; save them from following in the footsteps of the kind-hearted Ferdie – and she was really anxious to do this.

But it was only another daydream, and she knew it. She well knew that Mumsie would never allow it; Mumsie was such a loving mother at times. She would wait till her daughter had got her little home together and then she would have one of her attacks of mother-love, she would discover that she could never, never consent to be separated from her little boys. These little boys, though, were a problem to

Emmy; and they were a problem which had troubled her all the more of late for her contact with Simon. Something about Simon's manners and ways of speaking, the results of a classy background, as Emmy saw it, had filled her with envy on her own boys' behalf. Of course she had never wished the child any harm. She had grown really fond of the pretty little fellow; though it was not with admiration that she had once described him as 'a regular little tom – at *his* age!' Yet this kind of jealousy on her brothers' account had sometimes given her a mischievous inclination to take it out of spoilt little Master Simon.

All bright again, smiling to herself, disposed to be playful in her satisfaction, Emmy turned to the desk with other thoughts in mind than those connected with the sad packages. There was not much left in the desk beside these. But she found a few postcards and among them some enlargements of snapshots they had taken in the summer, pictures so amazingly pretty that, in sentimental mood, she had had them enlarged to postcard size. They were all of the cottage, the garden and the three of them. Little old reface was wonderfully photogenic; so were Simon and herself, snuggling together in the foreground.

Cigarette smouldering on the edge of the writing-flap, remains of pastries bought in the town, saucerless cup, tin of milk perched stickily on the well-polished desk-top, Emmy sat all at ease in the place of the two dead women and turned over these pictures and her summer's memories (happy, happy days!) and at last selected one of the cards for her purpose. She did not choose the one of Simon and herself, after all, but one of Catherine, not looking at her best, with the cottage in the background. Either picture would thrill the kid, but this one would thrill somebody else also, please God. And here Emmy could not but remember Roy and that ridiculous

fee-faw-fum message the boys had concocted while she was on the phone in the office. She had said they had better not send it, but she had added the top line herself, 'woe to the foxes', and she could not help laughing at the remembrance.

Now she simply wrote, 'My dear little Simon, I wonder if you've forgotten who this is and the little house? Your own Emmy.' Oh, yes, she had all along been very careful to keep it genteel and good-class, simple and sweet. She even wrote in a hand rounder, more backward, more infantile, than her normal one, not from guile, but because she had so completely entered into her role, the role of Miss Hare's artless young friend, the 'young girl'. Her features took part in this effect as she wrote; her top lip pushed up childishly. Who could object to such kind and simple attentions to his little boy?

Emmy's upbringing had been such that she had probably never even known a stage of youthful idealism; she did not expect that wrongs would ever be righted on this earth, for she had observed for herself that they never were; nor had she any romantic thoughts of rough justice. But, simply, it was amusing. It was amusing to think of a certain person coming in, picking up a bunch of letters on the hall-table and being confronted once more by a little reminder or souvenir of 'the cottage at Ockentree'.

'Well, enough of fun,' said Emmy to herself, her face changing. 'Now to business.'

There was nothing for it but to sell; and she would go to the same agent, for, by God, those who had pulled it off before to such a tune could do it again. She'd tell them to find her a sucker and bleed him, bleed him white. She'd tell them she was out to get the pattern off the plate, and that she'd make it worth their while. And let them not call up a blush for her benefit, not after what she knew of them. This very

afternoon on her way to the station she would do it. However, some idea that perhaps she did not quite know the best way to deal with a house-agent stayed her in the act of settling her hat. It might be as well to consult Greg first. Only they would all have to hustle. For a spell inside, though nothing to hurt, of course, always had a queer effect on Ferdy; it never did him any good. He would come out at his queerest, and his one idea would be to look after poor Ferdy and protect him from everybody, his one idea would be to collect. But Emmy still had three months. She thought that, with luck, three months might give her time to sell the house and tie up a bit of the loot somehow. If not, well, poor lass, pity her! By then, she'd have blued half it, anyway.

She threw off her hat again. 'Take it easy, Emmy!' She would make a bit of a clearance first, clear away a few of the private things before the lot was put up for sale; for the poor woman would thank her for that.

She now had a cheerful little fire going. She began fingering the packages, took up the one which was marked specially to be burned and opened it - a biggish packet, loose papers pushed into a cover. She hesitated. Inquisitiveness stirred in her, but she guessed, she knew, without reference to the Forresters' prim suggestions, 'She'd hate me to read it.' She struggled; glanced within, caught up a few words and closed the cover quickly.

'I want to cry out - I want to make someone hear me - I want to cry out and be heard - oh, for a voice - even animals cry out -'

The writing, too - wild!

Emmy sat looking at the cover, fingering it, raised her eyes to the postcard which she had propped up before her and stared into that desperate face with a sort of dismayed, half-comprehending curiosity.

A moment after, she had re-opened the cover, just a little way, and was squinting sidelong.

It came at her again, the breathless, exclamatory voice.

'What was it done for? What for?'

Emmy could not see how this was meant. 'Who asks questions like that,' she thought, astonished, 'unless they're mad?'

She peeped again; fell to temptation this time to the extent of a whole short passage. Ah, but it drew you! The demoralized writing was crazily distinct, as if kept so by an intense effort. The same stopless voice.

'What was it done for? What for? A shameful betrayal of one who loved You – who loved You in spite of everything, all Your persecution of the first time – shameful cruelty – shameful to let her kneel before You in humble gratitude, thanking You for Your goodness – Heavenly Father – with her brain already stricken, hell gaping for her. Did it amuse You? You are fond of terrible jokes. If You had done it to me, I would have acknowledged a justice. But to *her* –

'Blasphemy – nonsense. Who cares? No one hears. Deep down – fallen into the bottomless pit – out of hearing –

'I want to cry out – I want to make someone hear me – I want to cry out and be heard – oh, for a voice – even animals cry out –'

Emmy felt bad, she felt upset.

At the same time, the temptation to peep became less strong. High-class stuff about God, it seemed to be. She rose up, and with noble, histrionic gestures emptied the contents of the cover into the hearth and began feeding the papers to the flames. She was careful not to read any more. Still, she had to stir them from time to time to make them burn, and many fragments remained for some while intact and legible. This was how she suddenly came to realize, when it was two-thirds done, that she seemed to be burning up a whole

lot of poetry. Light broke on her. 'Ah, that's why it was – that's why she felt things so.'

But then for a moment her blood ran cold. Was she to go down to posterity as the girl who went and burned up a sort of *Paradise Lost* at one sitting? An ignorant girl? No reverence for Art? She made a hasty effort to salvage something with the tongs, but the fragments she succeeded in recovering would not have done for poems, after all, not in her opinion.

She calmed down, slyly reflecting that, fortunately, it was all under her own hat. Except for the Forresters? But they must have peeped, too, and not thought much of it. Philistine types, however, obviously.

She stood there thinking intently of her friend. A questioning look, which tilted her head alertly, now gave to that little pointed face a strong suggestion of the mask of some pretty, highly intelligent pet animal, a creature which, from so much friendly contact with humans, seems almost to have attained to an understanding of human feeling; almost, but not quite; and so, after all, there is a shade of forlornness, a far-off bewilderment, in the bright eyes.

No, she didn't know what to think. A regular child. A poor, horribly injured, weeping child. Asking what it was done for! Yet she had given the answer to herself, to Emmy's way of thinking. It happens; no one is there, no one hears.